Dark Tales
Volume 4

Edited by

Dorothy Davies

Gravestone Press

DARK TALES – VOLUME 4

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Limbo (Carl Hughes)

Jud and his four mates got bladdered on their crawl through the drinking dens of Penton-on-Sea, a resort which on that November night resembled a wasteland of shredded summer dreams. They had a good reason for their piss-up, or at least Jud had. Thanks to his buddies, he'd cheated the law for the first time in his life and that was all the excuse he needed to blow a month's benefits on a legless night out.

They started at five o'clock with a curry at the Taj Mahal in a backstreet that smelled of dead things from the fish market, then they traipsed from pub to pub and ended up at Mr Tom's Nitespot, a pit of a place that occupied the crypt of what was formerly a Benedictine priory and that stank like a sumo wrestler's scrotum. A din of heavy metal swelled between whitewashed walls down which condensation ran in strobe-coloured rivulets, while floozies with ginormous tits and micro skirts latched on to any bloke who'd give them a good time. A couple of heavies, their skeletons made of girders topped by heads of granite, ejected a group of black guys whose only offence seemed to be their colour. The men left with quiet dignity but Robbie, one of Jud's mates, said, 'They've done eff all wrong – I'm going to complain about them pieces of shit what call theirselves bouncers.'

'No you won't, not unless you want to get your nose busted and balls mashed to pulp,' said Gaz, another of the mates. So they turned away and got on with the serious business of blitzing themselves into oblivion.

Finally, when the club closed, Jud, his mates and all the other piss artists spilled on to the foggy street. The five buddies had the remaining hours of night to kill before they could head for home fifty-odd miles away on a bus that wasn't due to leave until eight o'clock in the morning. They'd bought return tickets so had the means of transport, even if all their dosh had gone down their throats in liquid form.

'What now?' Kris asked, clutching a bottle that he'd secured with the last of his money.

'God knows,' Jud said. 'First thing I'm gonna do, though, is take a leak.' Which he did against the window of a funeral parlour. His mates followed suit and Paul screamed through the letterbox, 'Fuck all you stiffs in the chapel of rest – I'm only here for the bier.' This tickled their funny bones and for the sake of raising the dead, Jud booted in a glass panel in the door. Afterwards they reeled down the street, taking turns at swigging from Kris's bottle. When the bottle was empty, Kris chucked it into the roadway where it smashed and presently ruptured a late-night taxi's front nearside tyre.

'I'm shagged,' Dave said. 'There's hours yet before we can go home and this fog's freezing my gonads. I'm gonna find a shop doorway to get some kip.'

The fog seemed to be thickening, rolling in from the sea with the stink of kelp and brine. A dog howled in the distance, a lonely note like a siren from a hinterland of the lost. The only other sounds were the slop of sea on shingle and the rattle of a train on the nearby crossing.

Szymon spewed in the gutter, retching so much that it seemed his guts were about to explode. For some reason that seemed to act as a trigger for the friends to break up and wander off in their solitary ways. Jud guessed they'd all find shop doorways but he'd never been able to sleep rough. Once, on a tenting holiday before his old man ran off with that tart from the upstairs flat, he'd scarcely slept for three nights. Tent life and rough sleeping weren't for him. So he knew he'd wouldn't manage to doze off in the cold, wet fog, whether he found a doorway or not. But as he wasn't prepared to walk around for hours, especially as his head felt as if it were starting to detach itself like a bit of Plasticine from his neck, he slumped down by the entrance to the pier and drew up his knees as if he were still in the womb. He felt pissed in every sense.

After fifteen minutes a cop car pulled up and a Plod and Plodess got out. The man had a pockmarked face as if he'd come into contact with a galaxy of wandering asteroids, and the woman looked as if she'd swallowed a rancid trout.

'What're you doing?' the Plod demanded.

Jud stared blearily. 'Killing time till morning,' he said.

'Not here, you're not. Shift your arse before we run you in for being drunk and disorderly.'

Jud frowned, then immediately wished he hadn't as it squinched his head into a tight band that felt like pressure to the brain. Still hugging his knees, he said, 'What the fuck are you on about? I'm not disorderly. I'm just sitting here doing no bugger no harm.'

The Plod and Plodess exchanged glances. Then the woman said, 'You're disorderly if we say you are. If you doubt that, see which side the magistrates come down on when we drag you into court.'

This wasn't a new experience for Jud. Once he'd been beaten up by a couple of thugs in uniform while attending a football match, not because he'd been rowdy (he hadn't) but because those saints of the constabulary hadn't liked the way he'd looked at them. It had been the same with some of his mates. None had had good dealings with those supposed paragons of justice. Sure, sometimes it was their own fault but often they'd been set upon only because of who they were.

Knowing better than to argue, and realising Plod would be on his back soon enough anyway, Jud got up and headed back into the town centre. A cold wind had got up, breathing the death rattle into autumn leaves, but at least it was serving to disperse the fog.

'Don't think you're going to get off with this – we'll nail you for something, you bastard.' That's what Police Constable Jackson had said three days ago at the crown court after Jud had been acquitted of robbery and causing grievous bodily harm.

He had his mates to thank for that acquittal. In August he'd mugged a decrepit pensioner in a wheelchair, knocking her to the ground (and unfortunately breaking her arm, though he reckoned that was her own crazy fault for getting it caught beneath one of the wheels), and he'd run off with her handbag. A waste of effort it had proved to be, for the bag contained only a few measly pounds, a laminated bus pass and a lipstick-smeared paper hanky. Yet for that petty misdemeanour he'd faced a long stretch inside, what with his past record; but his mates had come forward to testify in court that he'd had been with them sixty miles away at the time, cheering on their motorhead pal Terry Jesmond in a rallycross event. As the only independent witnesses to Jud's crime had been a pair of old biddies who'd seized up with fright in court, the judge had ordered the jury to dismiss the case. An excellent reason, therefore, for this piss-up at the coast. And may the forces of law and order fester forever in a stinking cesspit of rectitude.

Jud spent the rest of that night at Penton-on-Sea huddled in the doorway of a crumbling high-rise block of flats: a monolithic eyesore encased in cobwebs of scaffolding. The building probably needed the support of metal to remain upright, he thought sourly. He felt cold and miserable, his head aching as if a gnome with a billhook were scraping away the detritus that had collected on the insides of his skull. A clock on the gothic town hall struck the hours of three, four, five, and the town slumbered in a stillness usually found only in desert tombs or forsaken dungeons beneath the walls of crumbling castles.

Dawn eventually filtered through cloud the colour of unwashed linen and Jud stood up, his joints having seized like rusty joists. Bone weary, hung over, mouth feeling as tacky as a glue factory, he slouched down to the seafront and there he met up with his mates, who resembled things dredged from sewers.

'I could murder some breakfast,' Kris said.

'Christ, the thought of greasy bacon makes me want to spew up like Szymon did last night,' Jud told him. 'Anyway, we've no skrill – not a bloody sou between us.'

'What time d'you make it?' Robbie asked.

'Just after seven,' Gaz said. 'Nearly an hour before the bus leaves. And I hope none of you's lost your ticket cos it's a fucking long walk home otherwise.'

With the cold, damp air wafting through the early morning like corpse breath, they made their way to the bus station. Other pedestrians were now out in dribs and drabs, all looking as if they remained half in yesterday. Cars and motorbikes appeared in increasing numbers, their exhaust fumes coiling and coagulating in the murk.

The bus station was a big, draughty place with tattered posters, their messages obscured by graffiti. Splintery benches were set out at intervals while waste paper, cigarette ends and matchsticks had formed a sticky paste on the concrete walkways. Kris delved into an overflowing rubbish bin and came up with a half-eaten hot dog.

'Anybody want a congealed sausage?' he asked. Jud for one felt like gagging at the thought. Kris tossed the sausage away and ate what was left of the stale bread roll and onions.

The breeze increased to a frigid weave of rank air, creating a tumble of dead leaves that crackled like the lids of ancient trapdoors. Time passed and eventually their red double-decker bus pulled in, its interior lights as welcome as beacons on a dead sea. The five friends piled aboard and climbed to the upper deck, luxuriating in the warmth that dribbled through the heating vents. Few other people were travelling far at that hour so the bus contained only a dozen passengers when it left.

Stretching out on a double seat, Jud said to his mates, 'I'm stun-gone shagged. Wake me up when we reach our stop. And don't fucking forget.'

'Count on it,' Szymon said. 'Didn't we save you from a long stretch in the pen?'

'You're good mates – I owe you,' Jud mumbled, already drifting into a slumber that carried him on waves of warmth to the arms of Mother Comfort.

Exhaustion, the rocking of the bus and its pleasant growl of engine kept him under for a good long time. He dreamed of wandering through a series of tunnels, always sloping deeper underground, his way lit by flaming torches that revealed cave paintings that may have been left by Neanderthals. He knew these daubings were meant to convey messages but he found them as frustratingly cryptic as crossword clues written in Klingon. One dream morphed into another, he fidgeted, moaned about nothing that he could afterwards remember, and finally turned over.

And landed on the floor.

'What the *fuck*!'

The bus had stopped and its lights were off. No more cosseting warmth from the vents. Jud levered himself to his knees and looked around. Apart from himself, the upper deck was empty. Where in the name of God were his mates?

Then he looked outside and saw that during his kip the bus had reached the depot: journey's end. Which was nearly twelve miles from the stop where he should have got off. Other buses were parked in silent ranks all around, like metallic monoliths. The only illumination came from a few weak striplights in the roof.

Incensed, Jud realised that his mates had left him to sleep on while they'd alighted. The lousy filthy bastards. No doubt they'd thought it hilarious to abandon him, letting him become stranded without the means to get another bus or a taxi home. He didn't know what they had between their ears that passed for brains but he'd known greater nous in pickled shit. He wished them all the way to Hell in a wankfest wagon.

And what about the effing driver? Shouldn't he have checked that the bus was empty before he parked the thing up and tootled off for his tea break in the canteen or wherever else he'd pissed off to?

Cursing, damning his so-called mates, Jud nursed his aching head for a few minutes as silence pressed in like dense and sodden cotton wool. At last he got up, descended the stairs and pressed the emergency button to open the door.

An eerie emptiness greeted him. Emptiness as in the absence of humanity. No one was moving about the depot; there wasn't a sound of a voice or a footfall or even a cough. Just the noise of a frolicking wind outside like some wild beast let loose from a zoo.

'Hello – is anybody there?' he shouted. Then he muttered to himself, 'Stupid bloody question. This isn't a séance.' He soon realised it might as well have been, for no one replied. Only the echo of his own voice reverberated around the cream-washed walls.

Beginning to feel spooked, he picked his way between the ranks of buses until he reached the depot entrance. The vast frontage opened on to what Jud judged by its width and clutter of shops to be one of the main streets of town. Cars, buses and lorries occupied the roadway in both directions just as anyone would expect at the height of rush-hour chaos. Yet they were all stationary and driverless. And the footpaths were similarly deserted. Not a soul moved, only a discarded newspaper blew along the street in the lusty wind.

Jud stood, astounded, gazing around. His heart thudded slowly, metronomically, but too loud for comfort. There was about the morning a quality of light that came from the fading year: paler, as though the landscape it revealed were a product of over-diluted watercolours. In this strange and furtive reality, Jud's shadow stretched long and warped like something misfired from a kiln. Above, the sky was filled with puffballs of cloud that resembled an explosion in a powder factory.

After a minute, he took a few steps to his right then stopped again. His brain pulsed out a furnace of wild ideas, unbridled and coagulated. It seemed he'd entered a ghost town. The wind tore at his hair and rattled through the branches of a withered tree that stood at the roadside like a long-dead sentry.

He took a deep breath and bawled, 'Where's every fucker gone? Answer me, somebody.'

Apart from the gusts of wind that harried his voice away, only profound silence greeted him. Evidently the town had been abandoned.

Jud had never been one to handle stress well, and now he found his agitation level rocketing off the scale marked *Panic*. That metronomic heartbeat had turned into a piledriver working overtime. His breath came in spasmodic bursts, his fingers clenching and unclenching.

He stabbed frantic glances up and down the street. At one end appeared a gabled place with a clock tower and an ornate porticoed entrance. Probably the town hall. At the other end, rearing out of a graveyard, stood a church with a stunted spire, a thing that looked as if its builders must have considered it bad manners to poke holes in the sky.

Swallowing convulsively, he moved on, increasing his pace from a fast walk to a run. He ducked into several shops, screaming for service that wasn't forthcoming. He even did what previously he'd have considered unthinkable: he entered a police station without being dragged there. The place smelled of sweat, vomit and disinfectant, but of Plod there wasn't a hint. An incident book on the counter showed that the last entry had been made the previous night.

Outside again, and he came to a ruined office building that had evidently been gutted by fire. Sooty smoke smears and scorch marks seared the stonework around its windows, and the wreckage of what remained of the roof timbers resembled blackened bones. Jud was about to pass this place when movement from an upstairs window brought him to a stop.

A woman was standing there, gazing down at him: a young woman with flaxen hair like summer straw and an enigmatic smile that could have been filched from a mugshot of the Mona Lisa. Hope leaping in his heart, for never had he been so glad to see another human being, Jud was about to call to her when she moved away and out of sight.

'Hey, you – come back and talk to me, you crazy bitch!' he yelled. 'Tell me what the fuck's going on.'

He waited for only a few seconds before kicking away the panels of plywood that covered the building's entrance. Inside, he found the dereliction he'd expected. Walls were down, rubble piled in clumbers of wreckage, door frames burned to charcoal. The air hung heavy with the stale stench of smoke and burned timbers. He looked for the stairs that would take him to that upper floor where he'd seen the woman.

The stairs didn't exist. Neither did the upper floor. It had fallen in, no doubt during the fire that had ravaged this place. Which meant that either he'd imagined the woman or she'd been a ghost. Neither explanation appealed.

Heart heart palpitating, throat gunged with phlegm, Jud worked his tongue around a mouth that had turned greasy. Then, a flittery movement to his left made him jump. He wheeled around and saw the woman moving away from him along what remained of a corridor. A diaphanous gown in silken pale blue floated around her like ectoplasm and her feet made no sound on the rubble.

'Hey, Miss, please – just stop and talk to me.' Although the desperate words came out choky and glutinous, they were audible enough in that dead place but the woman gave no sign of having heard. She continued to move away as if on a cloud.

'Come back, you bitch!' Jud stumbled after her, having to climb over the debris. One scorched plank almost tripped him up but he kicked it aside and blundered on. The woman didn't appear to be in a hurry as she merely drifted, somehow unimpeded by the rubble. Not once did she have to climb over anything, or step around it: she seemed to waft leisurely as if on a coil of breeze. Jud kept shouting at her, telling her to stop, but she never faltered, never turned.

They passed from corridor to corridor, through one chamber after another: an impossible labyrinth in which Jud lost all sense of direction. After what felt like an aeon in the convoluted system he told himself that in any normal reality they must surely by now have found themselves outside the building. But the place just went on and on, its dust choking and making him wheeze. He felt he were on a slow-motion track to a nowhere world.

Eventually they came to a passage that seemed scarcely to have been touched by fire. Its woodblock floor was clear of rubble and looked to have been swept recently, while its sky-blue walls revealed only minimal smoke smudges. The air still reeked of burned wood but a cool breeze from the broken windows was doing its best to dispel the worst effects. The woman drifted along silently and serenely, Jud pounding in her wake but drawing no nearer.

The passage ended at a door the colour of sapphire, almost iridescent. The woman reached out for a handle that Jud couldn't see, and the door opened. She passed into a room of fluttery light that suggested illumination from candles. Jud hurried after her and the door closed behind him with a sigh like a dying breath.

He'd been right about the candles. Dozens of them flickered in bronze sconces set around the walls. The stone-floored, windowless chamber was scarcely bigger than the cells he'd occupied during his sojourns at Her Majesty's pleasure, and the grey stone walls were just as austere and uninviting. To the right was a door so white that it could have been fashioned from a fresh fall of snow. On the other side was a second door, this one as black as the Devil's armpits.

All of this occupied Jud's attention only peripherally. What riveted him were the two people looking him over with cool assessment. One was the woman, of course. The other, infinitely less savoury and squatting like a great ugly toad behind a metal desk, was a man with bulbous eyes and a head so bald that it appeared to shimmer in the candlelight. A cape the colour of Stygian night encased him from neck to ankles.

'What the fuck's going on here?' Jud demanded. His question emerged as no more than a rasp. Panic had written itself large in his psyche.

The man and woman exchanged glances. Then the man returned his attention to Jud, eyeing him as if he were a diarrhoea-inducing virus.

'What brought you here?' the creature asked. His voice sounded as harsh as pumice on broken glass.

'The fucking bus, of course.'

'That's not what I meant. D'you realise where you are?'

'Grotsville-on-Bollocks for all I care. I want to know where every fucker's gone.'

The woman spoke for the first time. Her voice sounded as glittery as tinsel, as delicate as a spider's web. She said, 'Jud, I'm the Angel of the Future and my colleague here is the Demon of the Past.'

'What the fuck's that supposed to mean and how d'you know my name?' Jud took a step towards the desk, then a step backwards. His innards felt like jelly on ice.

The toadlike creature addressed him as if he found Jud as loathsome as a turd burger. 'You, my friend, have somehow through carelessness and a warp in time entered Limbo – the place where the past has happened and the future is waiting to come about.'

'*Limbo*? I don't want to be stuck in Limbo, for Christ's sake!' Jud yelled. 'I've my whole life to lead. Anyway, isn't Limbo some Catholic crap? I don't go along with all that religion mumbo-jumbo. I was brought up an atheist, thank God.'

The man drummed his fingers on the desk, setting up a reverberation that frayed Jud's nerves further.

'What're you thinking?' Jud demanded.

'What my colleague is thinking is this,' the woman said. She had a beautiful face, like something Michelangelo might have sculpted in marble. But Jud wasn't into aesthetics just then. 'You have a choice to make, Jud. You can accompany the Demon through that black door into your past where you'll be reborn again and live your entire life once more while remembering nothing of what's in store for you as the years unfold. Maybe next time you won't fall asleep on the bus and your life will unfold as it was meant to do.'

'And what's my other choice?' he asked.

It was the Demon of the Past who answered. 'Your second option is to accompany this lady, the Angel of the Future, where you'll pick up your life where it left off when you entered Limbo. The future will catch up and you'll resume your life for however long or short it was meant to be.' He spread his hands. 'It's up to you, my vile friend.'

Jud somehow managed to get a grasp on his scrambled wits. This was no time to dissolve into petrification. He reckoned he'd had a shitty enough life without electing to go through it all again, what with probation, jail, and people always getting on his back when really he wasn't such a bad bastard.

He nodded, decision taken. ‘I’ll go with you, my darling,’ he said to the woman. ‘I’ll carry on where I left off, stepping into the future.’

‘Which may not be what you expect, of course, as by its very definition the future is unknown,’ the Angel said.

‘Yeah, yeah, sure. Can’t we just get on with it, for Christ’s sake? I’m pretty pissed off, let me tell you.’

‘As you wish.’

‘And good luck,’ the Demon of the Past said with a greasy chuckle that improved his frog face not one bit.

The woman held out a hand and Jud moved to take it, but before he could do so she moved off. He followed her through the white door and then through the labyrinthine ruin. This time the journey took less time than had their progress the other way and within a few minutes Jud was emerging on to the street.

He stared. The place was still deserted.

‘Where’s the fucking future I was promised?’ he demanded. But he was asking his question into a vacuum, for the Angel had vanished.

Frantic again, heart pounding like a pile driver on steroids, Jud raced up the centre of the road, screaming for the future to come and claim him.

Which it did.

Suddenly the buildings and the very air rippled as if seen through a fast-flowing and crystal stream; sounds emerged from the ether, building to a crescendo of rush-hour noise, and then there were pedestrians and traffic on this major thoroughfare.

Jud heard the blast of horn only in the second before a number eighty-four bus ran him over.

***

At the inquest, which was held in the gabled town hall with its clock tower and ornate porticoed entrance, the bus driver swore that the accident hadn’t been his fault. ‘The bloke appeared from nowhere, just like that,’ he said, and snapped his fingers.

Other motorists and a handful of pedestrians all said the same, leaving the coroner with the easy option of recording a verdict of death by misadventure.

‘People who do rash things such as running up the centre of main roads in busy periods are architects of their own doom,’ he said. ‘It’s a sad truth, but by being reckless we all ultimately get from life what we deserve.’

Ice Cream Song (Rickey Rivers Jr.)

Who doesn't love ice cream? Even hearing the theme play down the street is a memory every man to child holds dear. Every adult is just a big kid anyway, all of us with the memories of ice cream at the tip of our tongues. Rushing out of home, gathering up change, running after that big white truck with the stickers of ice cream possibilities. Oh, what a feeling, what a dream! You can't replace it and, with so many choices, how could you decide? You only had money for one.

Because of aging I see the ice cream man less and less: the song has faded. In the teens I saw him often, but in my twenties I'd only get a glance. By the time I turned forty I didn't see him at all. Sometimes I'd hear the smallness of the theme, but even making it outside I couldn't run fast enough to catch up with that big white truck. I wonder, would the man stop even stop for me? Maybe it's only a dream?

I sometimes wonder if the ice cream man today is the same one from childhood. I wonder if ice cream women had replaced men. Everything seems to skew differently these days. In the past women couldn't have those jobs. My sister manages a warehouse, but she's not the typical lady.

This year I sit on the porch and wait. It's summer and it's hot. The children are playing as children should on a hot summer day. They're running after each other and laughing, doing what adults don't have the energy to do. That energy has been replaced and stifled. We often run away from things as we age. We don't have time to play. All we do is work and sleep, eat a little, then repeat. We don't have time for much else.

While watching the children play, I can't help but wonder why the ice cream man isn't here. He should be here, either here or somewhere, near or far. Going to the store for ice cream isn't the same. I want the childhood memory of the tasty treat on my teeth and tongue, the coldness down my throat, the pleasure of gathering up the coins from the couch. I want to see that truck again, to hear that song again. I want that superhero like theme to play, and the man to emerge like a dream from a magical place.

I chase as best I can, I'd go down the street to meet him, like something of a date idea to a dreamer. That itself is worth more than the taste of sugar and cream. Memories are stronger than a treat. I wait until sundown, no luck, no theme, no truck.

***

A week passes. Once again the streets are filled with children laughing and playing, but none of them are enjoying ice cream. All are ignorant of the past, the present and how the future can quickly change. I got the mail already and went back inside. I sat back on the old chair in my home and prayed today, too. For the second time in my life I prayed for the ice cream man. Once before, as a child, I prayed for him. After a terrible day at school I walked home with my shirt ripped and prayed aloud. Soon after that prayer, I heard the jingle. The ice cream man came to me.

Now, I throw myself onto the couch and bury myself in the cushions. I scream out in the couch, burying my head into the cloth and in my head I heard the jingle play. That was untrue, it was a false tune.

***

I wake up late, and I'm sluggish. From somewhere near I think I hear something small that begins as a fly near the living room window. That small sound turns into the remnants of a jingle. The ice cream man, he must be near. The theme is now a bit closer, almost as close as a stranger, one who was once invisible, one who has just shown himself.

I rush, fumble with pants. I grab my shirt, nearly tripping over myself like a clown with colorful garments three times as large. I stumble to the front door and hobble my way out. I'm out of shape and out of breath. I refuse to be out of time. I look outside and see nothing. There's only the brightness of the

sun to greet me. I shuffle down the street and feel the concrete below. Only then do I see I've forgotten my shoes. Further down the street a little girl is eating a puffy yellow ice cream cone. It reminds me of tainted snow. I catch up to the girl and ask where she got the ice cream.

With a bright sun smile she says "The ice cream man! He was just here."

A lie, I thought, turning from her, I ran home, grab my car keys, the blistering concrete burning the underside of both feet. I pull off and circle the block, once, twice, three times, nothing! I can't find a sign of him, only children happy in his wake, all eating snow cones, ice pops and colored ice creams which were shaped like cartoon characters. The girl wasn't lying. This is now the most unfair thing, to be denied entry to the ice cream party, the ice cream man simply avoiding me, afraid of me.

I drive home annoyed, slam the car door shut, stomp back home like a man returning to his cave after venturing out in search of dinosaur. The blood trail followed me. My feet are sore and tender, blisters would follow.

At night a plan comes to me. If only I could take the children away from the streets, then the ice cream man would come, he'd have to come, after all he's their hero. He feeds the children, he's partial to smiles. Taking them away would ensure his disapproval, only then would I get to him. Only then would I win.

I spent all night considering this, then dreaming. Tomorrow I can snatch them up, one by one, then I'll wait for him.

***

It's morning now. I drive the block slow, searching, wanting, twisting, turning. I have to seek him out. He knows I'll hear the tune. I assume he's turned off the song or he's used a cloaking device to hide the truck. Remember being invisible in the same room, revelations after the earshot fly like a sound in another room? Ice cream men have power.

After a while I see the truth in front of me. The big white truck stands out like a snowball in the desert. There's at least ten children lined up. Which of them would be the treat? As a child my favorite was the vanilla dream mix, but I see so many variations. Chocolate was a one-time mistake. I couldn't get the latter; never again.

I wait here, behind the steering well as ten children dwindle to eight. I wait, seeing his hat peek out from the dark interior of the truck. It's the same one from before. They're all the same, the same man, the same attire. Now there's six children waiting. I'm tired, my eyes are itching. Every child is an obstacle now, speed bumps made of bone and guts.

My feet ache. Yesterday, I had to use gauze and alcohol. This is what the ice cream man does, he makes you suffer. He causes pain. Furthermore, the children, that stupid little girl from yesterday…

There's only three children left in line. I'm sick of waiting. I slam my foot on the gas. After slamming into the ice cream truck, every single child scatters, but that's unimportant. The ice cream man sees me, turns and cranks his engine. He's getting away!

I reverse with a plan in mind. I switch gear to drive and follow the big white truck. He's only a few feet in front of me, I doubt that big truck can pick up much speed. The children are making a bunch of noise now, but none of it means anything. They've got their ice cream. They should all be happy and shut up!

On the tail of the ice cream man, I slam into his bumper. It didn't take long to drive him off the road and into a telephone pole. Then I'm out of the car and climbing into the open ice cream truck window. He's mine now, all mine.

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All of that didn't happen. Slamming into the truck was real, the children scattering was real and even one of the children using a cell phone to report me to the police was real. But even stranger than that was what happened to the ice cream truck and the ice cream man himself. After hitting the rear truck bumper with the front of my vehicle, the air bag deployed and I was knocked out. Before that, the ice cream truck vanished, it ceased to be.

Every child there was a witness too, with the taste of ice cream at the back of their throats. All of them told the police that I had attacked the ice cream man and the ice cream man drove away, but the telephone pole that I swore he ran into was left without a scratch.

One of the children said that the ice cream man was as fast as the speed of light. In the courtroom he was seen as a hero. The children still believe the ice cream man is a good guy, the ultimate good guy who brings them treats. I was seen as a villain.

I asked my lawyer if he remembers ever seeing the ice cream man as an adult. At first he said no, then he said yes. Then he rethought, he recalled giving a dollar to his son because he saw or heard the truck pass. I asked if he'd ever seen the truck or spoke to the ice cream man as an adult and he said he couldn't recall.

It's funny isn't it? It's like the ice cream man hides from some of us. It's like he believes we don't deserve him. It's not fair, all the other adults seem to believe that's okay. Like childhood should be simply thrown away.

At times I think I hear the song too and I've dreamed of seeing him again. In one particular dream I see the ice cream man dressed in white. He walks down the long prison hallway and pushes an ice cream cone through the steel prison bars and into my cell. His arm stretches from the hallway and he's holding something cold next to my face.

I wake up, and reality comes back to me. I'll never see him again, not in this life. The ice cream man cares only for children. We differ in that way.

Tunnels (Damir Salkovic)

Killing oneself did not get easier with practice.

Carl Merriman found the fourth time to be just as difficult as the first: messy and bloody and undignified, his brain shrieking from the horror of it, unable to correlate the evidence of his eyes to any sane reality. But it was premeditated, so he'd at least had the opportunity to work out some of the details beforehand, such as the disposal of the body. It couldn't rightly be called murder, Carl reasoned -- if reason could still be said to apply to this scenario -- but it made sense to avoid run-ins with the law. The homeless were invisible until they committed a crime; then the police rarely gave them the benefit of a doubt.

Of the first encounter, Carl retained only fragmented images, like flashes from a broken film reel: blood and broken glass, red handprints on a piss-stained alley wall. The taste of vomit at the back of his throat. Horror and encroaching madness, his mind rebelling against the abnormality of the situation, threatening to shut itself down rather than deal with the impossible. There had been no warning, no premonition, no sense of fate hovering over him; unlike in films, the appearance of his exact double had not been foreshadowed by ominous music. He had detoured from his daily can-collecting route to delve into the dumpster behind a Michelin-starred restaurant that offered a brunch buffet on Saturdays, only to discover that another indigent had beaten him to it. His immediate reaction had been to leave: confrontations of this sort often turned violent, especially if the other party was crazy, or armed, or both. Carl had already started to double back when the man's head appeared over the dumpster's rim. For a moment, both were frozen, staring at each other with unbelieving eyes.

It was the look in those eyes that would haunt Carl in his dreams: confusion slowly giving way to horror, a sense of reality giving a hitch, slipping a gear. *This can't be real. This isn't happening.* That look was a dim reflection of what Carl himself felt, but the similarity had only inflamed his bloodlust. There had been no rationalization, no second-guessing: only panic and loathing, a red fog that clouded his thoughts, atavistic instinct taking over. He had felt his hand wrap around the neck of an empty bottle, heard the glass shatter on the brick wall and leaped up into the dumpster with a bellow worthy of any Pleistocene savage. The double -- always an it, he couldn't afford to think otherwise, to invest it with even a sliver of humanity -- had raised its hands slowly, without intent, as Carl shoved the sharp shard into its exposed throat.

Hot blood spurted into his eyes as he drove the jagged glass down, over and over, its coppery smell rising over the headier odor of the alley and garbage left too long in the sun. Carl was breathing hard, nausea rolling in his stomach. He dropped the glass and was sick over the side of the dumpster. Without looking, he could hear the gurgle of the dead thing as life leaked out of its wounds, the rustle of trash bags as it made small convulsive motions. Then it was still.

Briefly, blessedly, Carl was certain he'd gone insane. That he was seeing things. Years of alcohol and drug abuse, of sleeping rough in subways and the backs of alleys, of fighting rats and other transients for a warm, dry spot to spend the night, or a couple of dollars, or food, had to have taken their toll. But the dead body next to him in the dumpster, very real and very dead, quickly put to lie this convenient explanation. Blood dripped on plastic somewhere in the pile of bags. Carl's arms were red to the elbows. In his stabbing, slashing frenzy, he had cut his own palm open and the wound throbbed like a bad tooth. Reality asserted himself: he had to get away from the body, make sure no one connected him to it.

He climbed out of the dumpster and cast a wary eye about for witnesses. The alley was empty, the rows of windows looking down on it blank. No way of knowing if someone was watching from behind the glass, but there was nothing he could do about that. Besides, hardly anyone would have paid attention to what must have looked like -- what in fact had been -- a fight between two bums. Certainly not the inhabitants of the tall, featureless buildings, safe and warm and well-fed inside, going about their errands, doing their best to ignore one another. Some part of him processed all this with calm rationality while the rest of him screamed with guilt and fear. He had cleaned up the best he could, dragged the body behind the dumpster and fled blindly, muttering and filthy, pushing his way through the crowded sidewalks.

Another derelict madman, twitching and jabbering nonsense, made invisible by the very eccentricity of his behavior.

After that first death he had done a lot of thinking, examining the problem from every conceivable angle. Getting caught was a doubtful proposition. The police were unlikely to do much more than bag and tag the body, shelve the case in their unsolved files. One fewer homeless person on the street meant one fewer eyesore in its better neighborhoods, or one more empty bed in the perpetually overcrowded shelters in its less savory parts. But none of that mattered. The body he had left in the alley had been an exact replica of his own, down to the unruly hair and uneven cut of beard, down to the birthmark on the side of its neck and the long scar on its forearm, a memento of a power tool mishap from happier times. Any blood the law found on him would be his own, down to the last biological marker. The prints on the murder weapon would belong to the corpse. Even if the police bothered to investigate the death, it would be written off as a bizarre suicide, a schizo or a drug addict taking his own life in some kind of hallucinatory episode.

Carl believed he was in the clear, but he spent a day, then two days, then a week, hiding in places he usually avoided, mixing with winos and heroin addicts and those who chose to conduct their business far from prying eyes. He wasn't just trying to lay low; another realization had come to him. The double's movements were not random. The locations it visited, or inhabited, were familiar to Carl. He had known about the Saturday buffet at the restaurant, therefore the double had gone there. Any knowledge of the city's streets, any memories that had taken place there, had been taken from his own mind.

His memories. *His* past. The double had assimilated them along with his face, his walk, the unconscious habit of rubbing his temple when faced with a problem. It was a weakness in its design, a flaw Carl fully intended to exploit. Having killed two more in the week following that first murder, he had come to suspect that they had no understanding of the city as a concept, no ability to make their own decisions, to create its own recollections. An automaton, a replica capable of no more than a purposeless retreading of the original's actions, bereft of meaning or emotion. Some of the basic instincts remained intact: self-preservation, for one, hunger and thirst. This opened up a host of other possibilities, none of which Carl felt ready to explore. The double's existence went against the natural order of things; reality could only accommodate one Carl Merriman. It wasn't much of an identity, but it was the only one Carl had ever known. Any other contenders to his place in the universe had to be destroyed. That was all it boiled down to: survival, plain and simple.

Perhaps each double held similar beliefs in whatever passed for its mind. Perhaps that first one had been just as shocked and confused to see its mirror image standing in the alley: its reaction had certainly seemed genuine. But it couldn't reason or plan ahead, not in the way a human being could and this suited Carl just fine. He couldn't comprehend what was happening, but he had a pretty good idea *where* it would happen next. All he had to do was watch and wait.

***

It didn't take long for his suspicions to be confirmed.

He tracked down the second one near the shelter on the corner of Covenant and Mission, a few days after the encounter in the alley. Strangled it after a brief struggle behind a moving truck and ran, adrenaline pumping, when the lights started to come on in the townhouse across the street, narrowly evading a patrol car. This near-miss sobered him up: he was getting careless.

The third time he picked a bench across from the closed subway station and spent two cold and uncomfortable nights on it, swaddled in newspaper and reeking blankets, as patient as a deer hunter in a blind. Yellow police tape crisscrossed the entrance. With the power off and the lights out, it gaped like the mouth of a cave.

Sometime last fall a section of the tunnels had collapsed, causing backups miles long and armies of irate commuters battling for spots on overcrowded trains. The city's emergency's services and the cops had cordoned off the station, citing public safety and the danger posed by the old, crumbling tracks: the escalators had been taken out, the archways boarded up. Behind the false front of construction barricades was an impenetrable layer of armored doors and security devices, sensors monitoring all coming and going. Warning notices decreed that entry was forbidden, but Carl knew he had come to the right place.

It emerged half an hour or so after sunrise, bedraggled and wrapped in an old overcoat black with grime. Lifted its disheveled head into the air, an instinctive, animal movement, as if sniffing the air for a scent, and shambled down the sidewalk, attracting no attention from the rare passersby, vagrants and late-shift workers and drunks eager for their morning fix, swarming around the barred and bulletproofed fronts of the liquor stores.

Carl got up and followed, keeping his distance but making no effort to conceal himself. There was no need to hurry. After a few blocks, he had a pretty good idea where the double was headed: if he lost sight of it in the busier streets, all he had to do was meet it at the destination.

He found it in the burned-down warehouse, standing in the middle of the floor and looking around, a pitiful, confused look on its face as it beheld the blackened walls. The ruin still stank of smoke and agony, the dust and ash of those who had perished in the fire swirling in the fetid air. Painful memories stirred inside Carl: he still had nightmares about the fire, the faces of Steve and Odd Sally and Colonel Harley, the crazy Vietnam veteran, rising from the darkest rooms of his mind, screaming in animal terror and anguish. Flames crackling at the backs of their throats, burning them alive, nails splintering as they clawed at the blocked doors and windows in a futile attempt to escape the conflagration.

He knew that wasn't how it happened. Most of his friends had been either asleep or sailing the vast unexplored oceans of their addiction. Someone had knocked over one of the Sterno cans they used to cook their fixes and the makeshift camp had gone up in flames, triggering an explosion of old chemicals that the company had illegally dumped in the warehouse rather than paying for disposal. None of them had felt a thing. Rationally, Carl understood this, but the nightmare of burning, writhing bodies carried the strength of real experience. To the double there was no such distinction: overwhelmed by grief, it knelt on the floor and sobbed, its shoulders heaving under the old coat.

Given enough time, the double's stolen memories would settle down, pieces of the puzzle falling into place, enabling it to distinguish between the real and dreamed, the lived and the imagined.

Carl didn't plan on giving it that chance.

It heard his footsteps on the charred concrete and tried to turn round, but Carl was faster. The length of heavy pipe struck it on the back of the head: there was a soft crunch as the skull caved in, sending the thing sprawling. It groaned and turned a terrified, pleading eye on its attacker, but Carl was too far gone to stop. The world went away for a moment: he swung the pipe over and over again, until the face at his feet -- *his* face -- was an unrecognizable pulp of meat and bone and gristle.

When it was over, when the shakes and nausea had finally left him, he hauled the bloody thing down one of the loading docks and into the oily, black water of the river. He didn't think anyone would find the body even if he left it on the warehouse floor, but it always paid to be careful. Especially if, as he now knew, there would be other bodies. Other doubles coming up from the tunnels, crawling out of the abandoned subway station, spawned from the living darkness that dwelled beneath the streets.

Carl remembered encountering it down there, the seeping, viscous blackness that had shut down the subway, that the city's authorities had invented an elaborate and doubtlessly expensive lie to conceal. Deep in the cruel heart of winter, the temperatures plummeting below zero, he had sought shelter in the unused tunnels, where he would be warm enough to survive. A condemned section of the subway had collapsed into a lower, older passage, part of the original system built in the early nineteen-hundreds. Those crumbling walls had crumbled further, revealing an even deeper abyss, black caverns untouched by sunlight since time immemorial, reaching under the riverbed. The maintenance crews had sealed off the chasm as best they could, but it was easy for Carl, a veteran of squats and back alleys and vacant factories, to find his way in.

He was not alone. The city's budget had been depleted by a season of political infighting; the Mayor, suffering from a second-term ratings slump and faced with empty coffers, had announced a campaign to clean up the downtown streets, get rid of the homeless and criminals, reduce funding for the few shelters still on the public dime. They had all eventually found their way down to the tunnels and abandoned subway platforms, unvisited by maintenance crews, where it stayed warm even during the harshest freeze. Campsites and settlements had popped up overnight, the unwashed and unfed and unwanted milling about, scavenging for food and a warm place to sleep. Some of them Carl recognized, others looked familiar in that way the impoverished sometimes are: shapeless and grimy, prematurely aged by hunger and hardship, by horrors both real and imagined, they mumbled and shuffled and huddled around the hole

in the tunnel wall, sleepy from exhaustion and the damp, brine-scented warmth that seemed to emanate from within. He had found a dry spot in a corner, bundled himself up in old newspapers and layers of clothes, wrapped his sleeping bag around him and was asleep in minutes.

Only to wake up at some uncertain hour later, disoriented and groggy, to find the space suffused by a soft glow that came from no definite source. All around him men and women were on their feet, moving slowly toward the fallen-in section of the tunnel. Something glossy and black glistened in the gap, a membrane stretching from the tracks to the high ceiling like a great drop of oil, the faces of the homeless reflected and distended inside it. Silent and reverential, the gathering stood before it like worshippers at an altar. Strands of black, living matter extended from the taut surface, touching their upturned faces, covering them like a caul. Carl had walked through the throng, driven by a compulsion he could neither understand nor resist; reached out and seen his hand sink into the shimmering surface, disappear up to the wrist, then to the elbow, a faint tingling sensation he nevertheless felt in his marrow.

Dreams. Visions he couldn't recall when he woke, or emerged from his trancelike state, but that left him with a deep yearning, a sensation of something profound lost forever. Some essential part of him that had been taken away long ago, maybe even before he was born. Maybe before the first troglodyte stood upright on his hind legs on the antediluvian plain and gazed up at the stars, felt the first dim realization of the infinity overhead. He had filed out of the station with everyone else and shortly thereafter the entrance had been closed up, barriers and metal walls erected to keep the curious out.

Now Carl tried to imagine what it looked like down there: mobile laboratories and pressure-sealed airlocks, government scientists and soldiers running around, dissecting and probing and analyzing, trying to understand the darkness that had bubbled up from the sunless depths. Or perhaps it had retreated back to its lair, having fulfilled whatever unknowable purpose had brought it up into the realm of light. A cover-up of enormous proportions as the authorities scrambled for an explanation, an insight into the mystery.

No one was going down there now -- but something was coming up. Something wearing human skin and faces, with pieces of human thoughts roiling in its head, moving through the busy streets, invisible in its disguise. His skin, his face and the shapes of hundreds of others like him.

How many were still to come? He thought about all those who had gone underground in those bitter winter months, before the place was sealed off and quickly gave up that line of questioning. Reason was of no help here and everything he had learned about the world in his forty-seven years in it was similarly useless. What worked now was following his instincts, stripping his thought processes down to calculated violence and a tracker's cunning. His only comfort was the certainty that the doubles couldn't sneak past him unnoticed: sooner or later, their ingrained habits would reveal them to him. When that happened, he would be ready.

***

His next ambush spot he chose on intuition alone. A derelict hotel in what had once been an up-and-coming neighborhood, its empty windows looking away from the street into a weed-infested courtyard, its basement concrete and rough stone, a massive boiler furnace occupying one side of it like an ancient idol. The place's misfortunes had curiously paralleled Carl's own. In another life he had been a guest of the hotel, well-known to the staff and the smiling concierge, enjoyed boozy business lunches and the occasional after-hours tryst with a married woman who worked in the same office. Some years later, after the economic downturn had put paid both to his career and the hotel's operation, he had squatted in its boarded-up rooms with a motley community of destitute artists and fellow addicts, pooling food stamps and trying to get his life back in some semblance of order. He still had hope then; it had been, if not one of the happiest, certainly one of the most memorable periods in his life. If his theory were correct, if the doubles instinctively flocked to places that had left an indelible mark on his memory, this was where they would go.

The hotel entrance was on an empty street, the double-winged door and windows boarded up and covered in graffiti, rain-faded and yellowed NEW DEVELOPMENT COMING SOON posters plastered all over the grim, crumbling facade. Carl used a crowbar to force his way in through a service door he'd used in the past, crept into the cavernous former reception area and surveyed the dust-covered rubble. No

one had been here in a long time: this meant that he had come to the right place. He picked out a spot on the cobwebbed landing that gave him a good vantage over the foyer, laid out his tools and settled in to wait.

"Hey, buddy." The voice boomed from some indefinable space above him, as unfriendly and authoritative as it was loud. "Hey man, wake up. You can't be in here."

"Don't get too close to him," a second voice warned, brimming with barely contained disgust. "He smells worse than a dumpster in high summer."

A heavy boot prodded Carl in the ribs. He opened his eyes and was immediately blinded by a bright glare. He rolled on his side and raised his arms. Afterimages and shadows resolved into the figures of two cops standing above him, shining a flashlight directly into his face.

"This is private property," the first cop said. Behind the punishing beam of the flashlight, his face was a dark, featureless oval. "How did you get in? That's breaking and entering, plus trespassing."

"Let's just get him out of here," his partner said. "I hate the looks of this place. It's giving me the creeps."

"Wanna book him?"

"For being a bum? Just kick him out into the street. Save the city a few bucks. Save us a couple hours of paperwork."

He must have fallen asleep, lulled by the silence and darkness. Frantically he tried to see past the cardboard silhouettes of the cops, down the stairs, but the light was like ground glass in his eyes, turning the background into a shifting puzzle of shadows. Carl groped around in a panic, heard metal clatter on the cold tiled floor, heard a sharp intake of breath from the cops and booted feet retreating.

The beam danced across the stained walls.

"Put your hands up," the first cop was saying, his voice hard. "I want to see your hands."

Carl obliged, was grabbed roughly and rolled over onto his stomach. The second cop yanked his arms painfully behind his back, forced his face against the floor.

"Jesus," he said, slapping the handcuffs onto Carl's wrists. He shone the flashlight on the assortment of knives, on the blunt implements laid out in a neat row against the wall. "Sonofabitch's armed to the teeth. Looks like he's been preparing to fight an invasion."

"What the hell were you thinking?" the first cop breathed into Carl's ear, his breath redolent with coffee and cigarettes. "What's all this for?"

Carl knew better than to try to explain.

***

The detectives were silent for a long while after Carl finished his story. He knew how ludicrous it must sound, but they didn't laugh, or threaten him, or try to intimidate him into a confession. Behind their stony expressions, they looked scared, if anything, sharing a thought they didn't care to give voice to.

"We found blood on your clothes," the younger one finally said. His words were flat and inflectionless, a routine for routine's sake. "We've sent it in for testing. If it's not yours, you'll be charged with murder. Do you understand that?"

"He's confessed already." The older detective sounded resigned. His gaze wandered the interrogation room, refusing to alight on either his partner or Carl. "The dead wino in the alley and the one we found strangled in the street. We haven't fished one out of the river yet, but it's probably a matter of time. I'd say he's aware of his options."

"An insanity plea won't save you," the younger one said. Carl had the impression that he was really talking to his partner. But the older man remained unresponsive. "Think again. Is there anything else you want to tell us?"

Carl nodded. "I'd like to use the bathroom, if it's not too much trouble."

The detectives exchanged a relieved glance. An unsmiling police officer came in, escorted Carl out of the room. "Just like that old bag lady the other day," he heard the younger detective say. "Same story. Doppelgangers stealing her soul. Like a whachacallit, collective delusion."

If there was a response, the closing door cut it off.

Carl stared in the mirror over the sink. Its speckled surface showed a man, unkempt and bearded and weathered, in the middle of a dirty tiled room, squinting in harsh electric light, his eyes flat and empty, reflecting the reflection into infinity.

They would run their tests and they would let him go. He had no doubt that the other versions of him were exact replicas, right down to the cellular level. There was nothing to connect him to any of the murders. Nothing but a bewildering story concocted by a madman: death, underground horrors, secret government facilities. They would shake their heads at him and they would turn him out into the street and that frightened him more than anything else. Because the darkness was still out there, spawning in the tunnels, sending its emissaries out into the world. Something that had been ancient when the world was young, something far beyond the human mind's capacity to contain and dissect, to analyze and comprehend. Something capable of rebuilding man's memories along with his flesh, his fears and desires -- all the paltry chemical reactions that deluded him into believing that he was unique, that he had a soul.

He thought about the abandoned station and the laboratories, machinery beeping, seals hissing, automated valves and doors opening and closing, systems carrying out their programmed tasks. Who sat now behind the controls, watching the numbers scroll down, the lines trace their way across the monitors?

When they slept, did they dream of the world above, of light and warmth and life, or of the faceless darkness beyond the walls?

He saw that he couldn't quite recognize the man who stared back at him from the mirror, but knew that he would learn more about him a great deal sooner than he thought.

The sound of commotion reached him from the other side of the door. Without hurry, he pushed it open. A melee had broken out in the police station lobby. Three cops were wrestling with a homeless man, attempting to restrain him. The man was clad in a tattered coat, its front dark red with blood. He was kicking and struggling, screaming about someone coming, someone already moving among us and they had to do something, they had to destroy them before it was too late.

More officers pinned the man down, but not before Carl got a good look at his face. It was the face from the mirror, dirty and bearded and twisted with strain, but unmistakable.

Carl closed the door and went back to the sink. Where a mirror had been only moments ago now stretched a glossy, oily black surface, a membrane that seethed and bubbled as if it were breathing. Crude shapes like faces rose from and sank into its depths.

He put out a hand and touched the thing's secret face and when the hand went through he kept leaning in, watching his arm disappear, then his shoulder, until the blackness kissed his brow and invaded his nose and mouth, singing him to sleep.

***

"The hell you mean, he isn't here?"

The detective opened the stalls, one by one. Slowly, as if expecting to see the crazy wino crouched atop one of the toilet bowls, some sort of stupid practical joke. Ha-ha and all would be right with the world again.

Except it wouldn't. Not this time. Maybe not ever.

He ran his hand down the back of his neck, wiped the clammy sweat off on the side of his trousers. Over by the door, the flatfoot who had escorted the suspect into the bathroom was looking pale and unfocused, unable to meet his eye. He started to repeat the explanation, but the detective motioned him out, relished the ensuing moment of silence.

It was shaping up to be a hell of a week. Dead bums sprouting like weeds all over the streets, deranged, blood-soaked hobos and bag ladies babbling about ghosts stalking the streets, stealing their faces. Had to be some new and awful drug making the rounds, something even the poorest could afford. Hell of a time to be working overtime, but he needed the money.

If only I could clone myself, he thought wryly. Then he remembered the gibbering confessions and felt a chill chase down his spine. He would never admit it to anyone, but the lunatic who had just burst into the station kind of looked like the previous one. *A lot* like the guy who had fled, probably using the ruckus in the lobby as cover. Didn't mean anything: all these bums looked the same. Didn't mean anything at all.

Leaning over the sink, the detective checked out his reflection and immediately wished he hadn't. Bruises under his eyes, lines in the corners of his mouth, a slackening around the jawline that had set in at least a decade too early. He ought to take better care of himself, take some time off. Head up north and do some fishing. Maybe the crisis, or whatever it was, would blow over by the time he got back. Maybe he'd find the city changed, a more orderly, sane sort of place.

Fat chance.

He straightened up and sucked his paunch in. Turned the faucet on and frowned. Drops of black liquid spattered the cracked porcelain, swirled in the water around the drain.

Without thinking, the detective touched one of the droplets. An instant revulsion contorted his stomach; he tried to shake it off his hand, saw the mote leap off his finger and crawl down the drain. He crouched over the sink, peered down.

The darkness inside the hole was absolute, an utter absence of light. But he could sense something moving down there, something much larger than the drain, or the sink, or the entire building, for that matter.

He shook his head slowly and dried his hands. This was what overwork did to you: played havoc on your senses until you started seeing and hearing things that weren't there.

An itch had worked its way under the skin of his finger. The detective walked to the door, hesitated, then pushed his way out, bracing himself for the shouts and noise.

He had the impression it was going to be a very busy day.

Hard Wired Junction (Rickey Rivers Jr.)

1.

The guy had been there less than an hour. He spent time checking the modem, typing, reading and walking back to his truck. Hal watched most of this from the living room before he got bored. He went to the home office and stood in the doorway.

"What's up?"

"Not much, won't be much longer," said the guy.

"Oh, I'm not rushing. You work pretty fast."

"Got to, you know how it is."

"Yeah, gotta work…" He trailed off and looked at the ceiling, nothing was there. "I guess if it doesn't work we can call again."

The guy smiled. "Yeah, folks have problems with the new stuff, old wires in the walls… compatibility… you know."

"Yeah, makes sense."

There was silence. Cars passed outside, faint music blared. Hal couldn't hear anything but the bass of the music. He remembered having better hearing.

"Sir," said the guy. "You don't have to watch me."

"Oh, sorry… just making conversation." Hal crossed his arms. "Guess I was daydreaming."

The guy focused on the modem, looked at Hal and went back to the modem. "All done."

"Great!"

The guy took a look at the wires leading from the wall behind the computer, then turned to Hal who stepped aside. Paperwork was signed. The guy said thanks and went on his way. Hal felt the mood shift. It confused him.

***

When his wife, Leona, returned, Hal greeted her and showed off the new modem.

"Looks good, right? It's supposed be faster."

"Sure," she said, dropping her purse to the couch.

"We shouldn't have to call him again. He did a good job, worked fast."

"I'm glad he's up to your standard."

Hal laughed. "I like good workers. You know how I was back in the day."

"Yes, I remember. Was it the same guy?"

"No, it was a new guy. He was weird, but efficient, my kind of guy."

"Weird, how?"

"It didn't start that way, but… at some point I could tell he was acting different, funny, I guess."

"Did you cross your arms and block the doorway?"

"… how did you know?"

"You always do that! You stand in the doorway with your arms crossed. It's intimidating. Let me guess, you were bigger than him, too?"

"Well… yeah, I can't help that. I wasn't trying to intimidate him."

"Yeah, but that's how it looks and honestly that's how it feels."

Hal sighed. His size came with advantages and disadvantages, but he knew he'd never use his size for advantage unless he had to. Lots of people called him a teddy bear. Even Leona called him a fluff ball.

"Anyway," he went on. "We had a good talk. He knows his stuff… he didn't seem intimidated, not to me."

"But he seemed weird?"

"Yeah," he laughed. "Guess so."

Leona shook her head and went to the kitchen.

"Well, anyway, that should be the end of it."

***

Hal had to make a call a week after the last modem installation. He was pacing the whole time. He wanted to ask for someone else besides the last guy. At the same time he wanted to give the last guy another chance. Maybe get his name this time and remember it?

A day passed with the modem out of fix. Leona knew something was wrong but kept her thoughts to herself. Hal had already made arrangements for the guy to come out tomorrow but he kept the plans to himself. He wanted to surprised her.

The guy arrived shortly after Leona had left out for work. Before leaving, Leona made a small gesture to Hal about the modem by raising her phone to ceiling. Hal pretended not to notice.

The guy exited the white company van with a small black box. Hal greeted him at the front door.

"Sorry to call again."

"WIFI slow?"

"It's wonky, in and out."

"Must be the wires"

Hal led the guy back to the home office. Once there he left him to the work, briefly stepping out and back again to ask him his name.

"Louis," the guy said, with his head behind the monitor.

"Louis," Hal repeated. "Got it." He left the room smiling and satisfied.

***

Less than ten minutes later Louis left the home office and met Hal in the living room. Hal stood up, smiling. "All good?"

"Nah," said Louis. "I need to go in the attic and check the wires."

"What could be wrong with them?"

"Don't know, might be old, chewed up, gotta check em' out."

Hal forced a smile and led Louis to the pull down attic ladder in the hallway.

"Shouldn't be long," he said.

Hal waited below as Louis climbed up. Just be normal, he told himself. After a few minutes Lois came down.

"Well," said Hal. "What's the damage?"

"No damage, but I think you're on my back."

"What?"

"You've been hounded me this whole time."

"Hounding you?"

"You called for me. You asked for me specifically."

Hal crossed his arms. "You think that? This is your job."

Louis took a step forward. "I'm not scared of you. I've dealt with guys like you before."

Hal uncrossed his arms and clasped his hands together. "I'm not trying to scare you."

"You could have fooled me."

Hal stared at him. Louis had a young face, but there was small bit of anger behind his eyes, defiance. He was a small guy, probably unpopular everywhere. Hal understood this and thought about himself in comparison. He took a step back to quell his anger.

"Listen," said Hal. "I'm not trying to scare anyone. I don't care if you believe me. All I want is the WIFI fixed. After that I'll leave you alone. If we have more problems…I'll ask for someone else."

Louis took a big step forward. Now his chest was an inch away from Hal's. "You know I have your information. I know everything about you, this house, this neighborhood. I'm sick of it."

"What are you talking about?"

"Don't mess with me. I'm not dumb."

“I never said you were.”

“I could ruin you. I could really take you down.”

Hal's heart was pounding. It was the same kind of tempo his doctor warned him about. He took a step back and exhaled “Alright, I’m not sure if you have me confused with someone else, but I’ll let you have it. Just let me know what the problem is.”

“Wires are frayed. They need replacing.”

“Cool, how much is that?”

“Don’t know, be back tomorrow with the wires and a price.”

***

When Louis drove off Hal calmed down and called his IP provider. He confirmed his appointment time for tomorrow with the company's automated system and promised himself never to deal with Louis again.

He went to the living room and a sharp pain struck him. He grabbed his chest. The white company van was outside. How long had it been there? Soon the driver’s side door opened and Louis was heading toward the home holding a small black box. He was speed walking. He seemed upset.

Hal clutched the phone. His mind raced. He thought about Leona.

There was a knock on the front door. It broke him away from his thoughts. The knock was loud and hard, a rapid, impatient machine of a knock. Hal paced from the living room to the kitchen. Should he call the police?

He heard the sound of glass being broken. It was in the living room. Then he heard footsteps atop the broken glass.

Hal dropped the phone and readied himself. His knees shook. His dukes were up.

“Come on,” he said. “Come on!”

Louis didn’t take long to find him. Hal was in the hallway standing in a stance like he knew how to fight. The two men stood staring at each other, Louis clutching the small black box and Hal with both hands clutched in waiting.

For a time they were silent. Hal was breathing heavy. Louis was calm and his face was tight. In the darkness of the hallway Hal thought he seemed younger, slimmer?

Hal’s voice escaped his dry mouth. “W-what do you want?”

“I got your wires,” said Louis, raising the small black box.

Hal clenched his teeth. “You said tomorrow. You broke a window!”

“I got your wires,” he repeated.

Hal’s heart was racing. He grabbed at his throat. It felt like needles were being shaken inside a box.

Louis approached him. “I got your wires.”

“Stop saying that! Get outta my house!” Hal fell back but caught himself on the wall.

“Shouldn’t be long, I got your wires. They work too.”

Hal’s heart was speeding up fast. He tried to shout but he couldn’t. He fell to the floor, grabbed at air, slumping over.

“It’s alright,” said Louis. “I got your wires.”

In the darkness of the hallway Hal saw Louis’s face turn and twist itself into coils of hate. Hal felt panic in the dark spectacle of barbed anger, suffocation. He couldn’t breathe. The veins in his neck were stiff and he a drew a final breath.

2.

The white company van was in the driveway when Leona pulled in. She parked in the street, stepped out of her car and approached the front door. The broken window caught her attention almost immediately. She went back to her car and dialed Hal’s phone.

The phone rang, once… twice… three times.

“Pick up,” she said.

No answer. Her mind was racing. She took a few breaths. What was going on? Her phone rang and she answered. “Hal?!”

There was no answer, but breathing instead.

“Who is this?”

She looked at her phone screen. It said 'Fluff Ball.’

“Hello?”

A voice said “inside.” The phone hung up.

Leona called the police and locked her doors. She was told to stay on the line but she hung up instead. The phone rang. She saw the phone screen ‘Fluff Ball.’ She didn’t answer. More time passed. The phone rang again. She sat in her locked vehicle, thinking, staring at the broken living room window. All the missed calls said ‘Fluff Ball.’

She stared into the void of the broken living room window and saw something move, a shadow, the shadow of a person? She saw a man much smaller than Hal pass the broken window and cock his head in her direction.

She prayed whilst reaching into the glove compartment.

***

Leona used her key to unlock the front door, but it was already unlocked. Her heart was thumping for a different reason. To enter her familiar home was like walking into a new one. The interior was the same, but different. Broken glass was scattered across the living room carpet. She took careful steps around her own home, looking for anyone not her husband. That’s when she saw the wires.

They were leading from the hallway into the home office, pulsating on the walls leading to the attic. They were red and black and blue, serpent-like in how they seemed to contort around chairs and doorknobs. Some of the wires were a yellow and orange mix. A bundle seemed to be thrown on the living room couch in a shape that was almost human. By the time she noticed one had wrapped itself around her shins it was too late. A harsh yank pulled her through the hallway into the bedroom then redirected back into the hallway and into the attic.

This was dark and full of dust and boxes. She kept a hand behind her as she bore witness to what was tugging her beyond the wires. It revealed itself to her. It was a man, but not a man, a sculpture, a creature, a whirling mess of wires in the shape of an almost person, something made up of mostly wires which formed itself into a caricature of a possible human. This swirling mass of electrical rope seemed to hum and delight in the joy of pulling her close.

Leona was in a daze but managed to pull the pistol out from behind her and fire madly into the creature’s frame. This seemed to do nothing. The mass of wires seemed almost tickled, bellowing from inside. She hardly heard the sounds from below. The humming of the creature reverberated around the attic walls and ceiling. Then she heard more shouting men downstairs. They came hurrying up the attic ladder.

There were gunshots, fighting, pulling, silence…

***

It took three hours. As far as anyone else knew, Leona was lost in the piles of electrical wires, it took three hours and the jaws of life to finally pry her out. When they found her she was dehydrated.

One of the officers said it was like she had drowned. She needed oxygen, so much so that she seemed to be barely breathing once they recovered her body. But she was alive, only just.

An ambulance was called shortly after officers arrived on the scene and discovered the broken living room window. Infusion therapy started as soon as they were able to get Leona into the ambulance. When she was able to speak she asked for her husband. A paramedic put a blanket over her and shushed her to sleep. Leona shrugged off the blanket and repeated herself.

“I’m not cold,” she said. “Where’s Hal?”

“Ma’am, you’ve been through a lot-”

Leona grabbed the paramedic's arm. She was weak, but strong enough to be angry. "Where is my husband?"

The paramedic's eyes grew large. She was young, a trainee? "Ma'am, when the police arrived there were two men in the home. Both were in the attic with you. Both were drained to nearly the size of an ancient corpse. We're lucky to find you alive."

Leona shook her head, let go of the paramedic and squeezed her own blouse up to her throat. With teary eyes she spoke aloud. "What do I do?"

"Ma'am, we'll get you some help. We-"

Leona's phone rang. The same jingle she had picked out months prior. Instinctively she pulled the phone out of her pocket, but she didn't have the strength or care to lift it up. The phone fell to the floor.

"I'll get it." The paramedic reached down to gather the phone as the police siren blared outside the vehicle. Leona wondered if that was necessary. Did the neighbors need to know how much pain she was in? Why couldn't they be quiet and give her time to herself? She didn't notice the phone had stopped ringing once the paramedic recovered it and lifted her head to pass it off.

"Who is it?" she said.

The paramedic glanced at the screen. "Fluff Ball."

Leona smiled to herself, then laughing, looking up at the ambulance roof, then at the paramedic who didn't understand.

Dead Bodies Don't Scream (Michelle Ann King)

Allie takes the bowl of cold congealed chicken noodle off her sister's bedside table and replaces it with a fresh, hot one. She tells herself that the level in the old one has gone down, that Rae has eaten at least some of it. That might be true.

She also tells herself that her sister's colour is better today, her eyes brighter. That's not.

Rae coughs, a bubbling underwater sound. The force of it lifts her halfway off the bed and when she finally drops back, panting and limp, her lips are bright with blood.

Allie sinks to the floor beside the bed, the taste of despair bitter and metallic in her throat.

This isn't right.

Some people might be meant to come to a squalid, meaningless end — Allie herself, for example; she'd accept that — but not Rae. She's the useful one; the one who learned to be a normal, functioning member of society. Things like this aren't supposed to happen to people like her.

She should have had a miracle — a medical breakthrough, a pioneering treatment, an experimental drug. Something. *Anything*.

Instead, she got nothing but grave-faced regret and *I'm sorry, but there's nothing more we can do*. She got a musty bedroom, a surrender of hope and a long, slow wait.

It isn't right.

It isn't *right*.

Allie wipes her eyes, then stands up and kisses Rae's hair. 'I'll be back soon,' she says.

Because the universe doesn't care about right and wrong; she's always known that. It doesn't care about fairness or justice or providing miracles.

If you need any of those things, you have to go and get them for yourself.

***

Parents, grandparents, siblings, cousins… all of them have dropped out of the picture over the years, either into prison or the grave. Uncle Fraser, who might be an actual uncle or might not, is the only thing resembling family they have left.

He lives in a studio flat in a development on the river supposed to be part of an urban regeneration programme but long since gave way to entropy and disinterest. Now it's the kind of place where taxis won't go and kids post dog turds through the letterboxes like junk mail.

He's fifty-four but looks two decades older, thin and pale like some kind of nocturnal animal. But he's still alive, which has to count for something. Better genes, perhaps. Or better drugs.

Even when they were kids, Rae never believed the stories about him. But Rae's always managed to live in a different world to Allie; one where things make sense and logic prevails.

'I'm sorry about your sister,' Fraser says now. His voice sounds rusty, as if he doesn't use it often. 'But I can't help her. You know that.'

Allie shakes her head, because that's not what she knows.

He sighs. 'Allie, all that stuff your mother told you — it was just a game, a stupid game. An excuse to take drugs and have sex. It wasn't real.'

'I know it went wrong, before,' she says, aiming for gentleness. 'I know people got hurt. But—'

He runs a hand through his stringy grey hair and won't look at her. 'Allie, I can't—'

Okay; fuck gentle. She hasn't got time for it.

Rae hasn't got time.

She grabs his coat, a filthy, ratty thing that smells of wet dog, and throws it at him. 'But it was thirty fucking years ago, Fraser. It's time to get over it. Let's go.'

He still won't meet her eyes. 'I'm sorry, I really am. But there's nothing I can—'

Allie hauls her arm back and punches him in the face, because she's fucked if she's listening to that anymore.

It's a good punch, thrown with accuracy and vigour, that connects solidly with his jaw. His head snaps back and he goes down hard.

She crouches beside him. Spilled sugar crunches under her boots. 'It's just a healing spell, Fraser. Just healing, that's all.'

'There's still a price,' he says and his voice is broken. 'There's always a price.'

'That's fine,' she says, straightening up again. 'I'll pay it.'

'You don't know what that means. You don't understand.'

Allie shrugs. He's probably right, but she doesn't care.

'Let's go,' she says again and this time he doesn't argue.

***

Rae's asleep when they get back. Allie starts moving the bowls and glasses out of the way, then sees the bottle of vodka and the bottles of pills on the floor by the bed. The empty bottle of vodka. The empty bottles of pills.

'Oh, shit,' Fraser says softly.

Allie grabs hold of Rae's arms and hoists her into a sitting position. There's a folded piece of paper in her hand.

'No,' Allie says. 'No, no, no.'

The note is terse and barely legible. *It's better this way* is all it says.

'The *fuck* it is,' Allie says, but Rae doesn't respond. Her skin is cold, her limbs heavy. Allie puts a hand on her chest and a cheek against her lips, but there's no movement. No breath.

Eventually, Fraser puts a hand on Allie's shoulder. 'I'm so sorry,' he says. 'What can I do? Do you want me to start making the calls?'

'What calls?'

'The police, the hospital. They'll need—'

'No.' She stands up and crumples Rae's note into a ball. 'Nothing's changed. We carry on. We just need a different kind of spell now.'

He let out a short, explosive exhalation, as if he's been punched in the gut. 'Oh, Allie, no.'

'Yes,' Allie says. 'Understand me, Fraser: you're not walking out of this room unless she does.'

He doesn't answer, but he knows he means it. She can see the truth of it in her own eyes reflected in his.

His shoulders sag. 'This is bad magic, Allie. Really bad. The power for a resurrection — it literally means dealing with a demon. And it'll go bad. It *always* goes bad.'

Allie feels her lips stretch in a grin. 'I never expected to get old, Fraser. Do what you have to do.'

For a second he looks at her as if he's wondering whether he's got the guts to kill her himself. But in the end, he does as he's told.

***

It hurts, letting a demon possess you. It hurts like *fuck*. But Allie can handle pain. She's done it before. Grit your teeth. Focus. Breathe.

Her insides are burning, as if the blood's been set alight in her veins. Sweat stands out on her skin, drips into her eyes. That burns, too.

Grit. Focus. Breathe. Scream, if you have to.

She can hear Fraser talking, but can't make out the words. She vomits green, which makes her laugh —because, really, what a cliché — then choke.

Fraser helps her stand up and walk over to Rae's bed. His eyes are wide, the pupils huge and black. People have looked at her with fear before, but not quite to this extent. She kind of likes it.

He takes her hand and puts it on Rae's forehead. She looks down and is amazed to see that her body is still made of flesh and blood instead of blackened, charred bone.

Grit. Focus. Scream.

Rae screams, too. Rae screams long and hard. It's not supposed to be this bad, is it? Not for her? Allie was prepared to suffer, but this wasn't part of the plan. Rae's supposed to be getting better, not shrieking in agony.

Fraser is no use. Either he doesn't know or he's simply too scared to speak. *It goes bad*, he'd said. Was this what he meant? But it's too late to worry about that now. Too late to back out.

At some point, the police come. Allie sends Fraser down to get rid of them and by some miracle he does. She doesn't know how. If she were a cop, she wouldn't find Fraser a reassuring presence. Maybe he pays them off, maybe he mind-controls them. Maybe he slits their throats and buries them in the back garden. She doesn't care.

Rae carries on shrieking, over and over. The sound hurts Allie's ears and her heart, but she keeps reminding herself it's a good thing.

Dead bodies don't scream, after all.

***

Allie wakes up on the floor with a foul taste in her mouth and pain spiking behind her eyes. She struggles to orient herself — where is she, what happened, is she in trouble? — but her memory doesn't want to comply.

It's not the first time she's had this experience. Usually, she almost enjoys it: a few moments of tabula rasa, with no guilt or regret. She's often wondered if amnesia would be like this. Or dying.

Then she sees Fraser watching her and it all comes back. He's huddled in the corner, his knees drawn up to his chest and his back resting against the wall. He eyes her warily.

She clambers slowly to her feet. 'Where's Rae?'

'Downstairs.'

'Is she...' she trails off, not knowing how to complete the question. Not knowing exactly what it is she's trying to ask.

He shrugs, as if that's an answer. Maybe it is.

She finds her sister sitting at the kitchen table with an untouched cup of coffee by her side. She looks exhausted. But alive. *Alive*.

Allie waits, although she's not entirely sure what for. A hug? A punch?

Rae says nothing at all, so Allie pours herself the rest of the coffee. It's strong and bitter and hurts her throat, but she forces herself to finish it. It feels important, a symbolic act. Here we are, having breakfast. Life goes on.

'So,' Rae says eventually. 'What does this mean?'

Allie gives her an enquiring look. 'In what sense?'

'In every sense. Does anyone else know? What are we going to say happened to me? Misdiagnosis, spontaneous remission, the power of prayer? What are the practicalities? Is there a limit on how long I get? Or you? Did you sell your soul, ten years of your life, your first-born? Are there conditions? Do I need to stay out of the sun or drink blood now? Do I turn into a pumpkin at midnight? Come on, Allie, what are the logistics of this thing?'

Allie can't help laughing. Logistics. At least she knows it's definitely Rae that came back. Only she would think like that.

She spreads her hands. 'You're here. You're alive. Does any of the rest of it matter?'

Rae gives her a look — an old, familiar look that says *if you don't understand, I can't explain it to you.* Fraser comes into the kitchen and she gives him a look too; a different but no less familiar one. *You shouldn't have done this.*

'I know,' he says. 'Believe me, I know.'

'You're alive,' Allie says again. 'Fuck logistics and practicalities and whatever else. You're *alive*. We did a good thing here. Am I the only one who thinks that?'

The other two look at each other, but not at her. Apparently, yes, she is.

***

In the end, Rae worries for nothing; nobody asks any awkward questions at all, not even the hospital. God bless the inefficiency of the NHS.

Allie fields the few calls from friends and colleagues, who'd never been told the full story anyway, with platitudes and vague references to a long bout of glandular fever. They're all pleased to hear that Rae's on the mend and go away satisfied with Allie's assurances that she'll be in touch when she's back on her feet.

'There you go,' she says. 'It's fine.'

And it is. It's all fine. Okay, so she has nightmares and a near-constant headache and sometimes sees things that aren't there, but she can handle it. And her eyes have turned a pale, icy blue, which is a bit freaky, admittedly, but it suits her. It's fine.

Rae starts fretting about epilepsy, about brain damage, but Allie dismisses her concerns. There's nothing going on that she hasn't lived through after a hundred drug and booze binges in the past. The fluttering in her chest, the heat in her skin, the pressure behind her eyes. It's nothing new, nothing strange. Nothing to worry about.

Her little flick knife is a comfort. She runs her thumb over the edge, enjoying the feel of it. The potential of it. Fire helps, too. External heat seems to draw out the heat inside her, calm it down. One day she lights the hob, turns the gas up high and puts her hand into the flame, remembering a vision of stripped, scorched bone. Her palm blisters and weeps, but there's no pain. She's vaguely disappointed.

By the time Rae has finished yelling at her and fetched the first aid kit, the burns have already healed.

'It's fine,' Allie tells her, one last time.

Rae doesn't argue, but the look in her eyes isn't relief. It's horror.

'What have you done?' she whispers. 'Allie, what have you done?'

Allie doesn't answer. She doesn't know how.

***

Fraser answers the door in a stained shirt, an unlit cigarette hanging out of his mouth. 'Wow,' he says. 'Don't you look like shit?'

'Thanks,' Allie says, and shoulders past him. 'Kind of you to say so.'

The flat is littered with bottles of booze. Most are empty, not all. Allie grabs a litre of supermarket gin and uncaps it. 'Ground rules for this conversation, number one: you do not say I told you so at any point. Understood?'

Fraser's face turns grave. 'What happened?'

Allie takes a long, burning swallow of the gin. 'It's still in me.'

'What?'

'Whatever you called down that night. To perform the resurrection. It didn't leave.'

'Shit,' he says. 'That's — shit.'

'Yeah, thanks. I got that far on my own. Any other thoughts?'

He rubs his chin, his hand rasping over grey stubble. 'Has it made contact?'

Allie laughs. The sound comes out high and strange and she's glad when it stops. 'Yeah, you could say that. It's in my *head*, Fraser.'

'What does it want?'

'Oh, the usual. Pain, suffering, torment.'

He steps towards her. 'Oh, Allie—'

'Don't.' She backs away, her hand held up, then clenches it into a fist. The nails bite into her palm, leaving little crescents of blood. 'It's getting bored with my pain, that's the trouble.' She looks away. 'I'm frightened, Fraser. I'm frightened about what it might make me do. I can feel it, looking out through my eyes. And it keeps looking at Rae.'

'Shit,' he says again.

'I'm not going to take the chance that it might do something to her. Not after we've come this far.' She empties the bottle and coughs. Her throat feels like it's been sandpapered. 'So how do we get rid of it?'

'I have no idea.'

She stares at him. ‘What?’

He starts pacing the room. Since it’s so tiny he has to turn around after every six steps and it makes Allie dizzy to watch him.

‘I don’t *know*, Allie. I did some shit when I was younger because I was a fucking idiot who didn’t know any better, but that doesn’t make me a goddamn expert. I put together that ritual out of spit and sellotape and quite frankly I was fucking shocked that it worked. I don’t know how to fix this.’

‘So make it up,’ Allie says. She’s been grinding her teeth in her sleep lately and her jaw is aching. ‘If you made it up last time and it worked, do it again. Come on, for fuck’s sake. We’ve all seen the films.’

He lets out a sharp burst of laughter. ‘Yeah. I’ve seen plenty. And you know what? They don’t end well. Oh, and in case you hadn’t noticed, I’m not a priest. I haven’t got a stash of holy water and incense in the cupboard. I haven’t even got a fucking Bible.’

‘So what am I supposed to do? Wander down to St Dominic’s and ask if they can fit in a quick exorcism between the christenings and the Women’s Institute jumble sale?’

He slumps into a filthy armchair. ‘I don’t even think the Catholics do it anymore. Or maybe I’m just taking that from the films, as well. I don’t know. I don’t *know*.’

She kneels down in front of the chair. ‘Try. Please, Fraser. Just try.’

He blows out a long, whistling breath, closes his eyes, and puts his hands on her head. ‘In the name —’ he starts, but that’s all Allie hears before she blacks out.

There’s no comforting drift when she comes back this time, no brief moment of floaty, undemanding peace. She’s slammed straight back into full awareness of the blood in her mouth, the pain in every part of her body and the demon laughing in her head.

Yeah, it says. The voice sounds like her own. *That’s not going to work.*

The flick knife is in her hand. She’s not sure when that happened.

Kill him, the voice says. *Kill him and I’ll leave you alone.*

Fraser’s eyes widen and she wonders if he heard it too.

‘Liar,’ she says and it laughs again. The sound is like snakes hissing directly into her brain.

Kill him. *Kill him now, Allie. You'll enjoy it, I promise.*

‘I’m sorry,’ Fraser says. His face is drawn and grey. ‘I don’t know what to do.’

‘It’s okay,’ she says. ‘I do.’

The hand still clutching the knife twitches. It wants to rise, so she lets it.

‘Tell Rae I’m sorry,’ she adds, although she’s not entirely sure what for. Then she sticks the knife into the soft flesh under her jaw and drags it across her throat.

***

She understands why Rae looked so exhausted, now. Coming back from the dead is a *fuck* of a thing.

Rae takes her home, gives her a measured dose of prescription painkillers and a judgemental attitude, as if she herself hadn’t been the first suicide. Hers might have been less messy, true, but as far as Allie’s concerned, the moral high ground is actually pretty low.

And through it all, the demon laughs itself stupid. *Noble self-sacrifice isn’t that fulfilling,* it says. *I’m still hungry*.

Fuck you, she says and it sets her insides on fire.

She used to think she knew what pain was, but she didn’t have a fucking clue.

She makes Rae and Fraser tie her to the bed, although she’s fairly sure the demon could get her out of the restraints if it wanted to. But the gesture makes her feel a bit better, at least.

‘It’s fine,’ she says. ‘I’ll just be the madwoman in the attic. Or the guest room, whatever. Every good family should have one, right?’

They don’t seem to find this funny, but Allie thinks you’ve got to keep a sense of humour about these things. She keeps thinking that right up until the bed rots away from underneath her.

‘It’s too powerful,’ Fraser says. ‘The evil. Your body can’t contain it. If it isn’t—’ he swallows. ‘*Vented*, it’s going to keep building up. And then it’ll — well, it’ll leak.’

The smell in the room is bad. Allie lived in a squat once, a place that had flooded and been declared uninhabitable until it dried. This reminded her of that house: a pervasive wet mould, filling the nostrils and catching at the back of the throat.

The wallpaper peels away, revealing a layer of spotty black fungus on the plaster. The carpet squelches underfoot. Food goes bad within ten minutes of being brought into the room. Allie learns to eat fast.

'I'll go back to Fraser's,' she says. 'That whole block is such a dump already, nobody will notice.'

They don't seem to think that's funny, either. In fairness, nor does Allie.

The demon, however, thinks it's all hilarious. *Typhoid Allie*, it says, and giggles.

She catches on about thirty seconds before Fraser starts coughing.

'Fuck,' she says. 'Come on, this is enough. Enough.'

Not for me.

Fraser's panting for breath like he's just run a marathon and his skin is sallow and clammy. Allie tries to help Rae lift him but he screams when her hand touches his skin, and vomits blood over his shirt. Rae shoos her away and drags him out of the room herself.

Allie goes to the window. The front garden's been neglected for a while now, the once-neat lawn choked with tall, vicious-looking weeds. As she watches, they begin to turn brown.

'All right,' she says. 'You win. I'll do it.'

Do what, Missy? I like specifics.

'I'll kill for you. If that'll make it stop, I'll do it.'

'No,' Rae says from the doorway. From somewhere behind her, Fraser starts retching again.

Allie rests her aching forehead on the glass. 'If I'm going to be the kiss of death anyway, then better some scumbag off the street than your neighbours, or somebody who just happens to wander past and get too close. I know plenty of people the world won't miss, Rae. Better we lose a dealer or a pimp than Fraser. Or you.'

Rae's voice is eerily calm. 'No. It's not. This is my fault, Allie, because I was supposed to die. So I have to be the one that dies now, to put it right.'

'No. No way. That's not how this works.'

'It has to be.' Rae strides into the room and grabs her wrist. 'Kill me. You have to. *That's* the way we make it stop.'

Allie yanks her arm out of Rae's grip. 'I said *no*. And for fuck's sake, keep away from me.'

'Too late,' Rae says and now her voice is gentle. 'Kiss of death anyway, remember?'

She lifts up the bottom of her t-shirt and Allie looks away, but that's too late as well; she can't unsee the grey and flaking skin, the blisters spilling greenish, blood-speckled fluid.

You fucker, she tells the voice in her head. *You lying, cheating fucker*.

It giggles and the sound swallows everything for a while. When Allie can hear properly again, the air is filled with the dissonant warble of an ambulance siren. She checks the window and sees it pull up at a house across the street, blue lights flashing.

'Allie,' Rae's voice says. 'You need to do this quickly, or it's just going to keep getting worse.'

In her hand is a long-bladed kitchen knife. She holds it out. 'Take it,' she says. It's a command.

Allie's fingers feel numb, but she watches them close around the handle. The knuckles turn white.

Rae stretches out on the floor and pats her chest. 'Here, into the heart. It'll be quick. And then this will be over.'

Allie kneels beside her as more sirens join their discordant voices to the first. Rae smiles, and closes her eyes. 'It's all right.'

'No, it's not,' Allie says, but she raises the knife anyway.

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She stays kneeling on the floor for a long time. Eventually, she'll have to get up. There are things she needs to do. Practicalities to take care of. Logistics. She laughs and it comes out as a sob.

But the flames inside her body — her mind — have gone out. And there are no more sirens.

For a while, the demon says.

Allie freezes. Beside her, Rae's body arches off the floor. Her mouth opens wide and her eyes fly open. She screams, high and loud.

The laughter in Allie's head this time is more of a sated, indolent chuckle. *You wanted me to bring her back,* it says. *That was the deal, wasn't it? I'm just doing what you wanted.*

Allie pushes herself to her feet and she kicks the knife, sending it skittering away across the room.

Good choice, the demon says. *We can try a more hands-on approach, next time. Strangulation is always fun. Or guns. I like guns.*

Rae sits up, gasping and choking. Her skin is smooth and unblemished.

There's a sound like a yawn and Allie can imagine something stretching sinuously behind her eyes. *Don't fret*, it says, with that soft, amused laugh. *We'll have plenty of time to try them all.*

The New Adventures of Daisy Maisy (David Turnbull)

Should you be the one who has found me, and witnessed the aftermath of my endeavours, I apologise for any trauma this may cause you. I apologise for the nightmares that may follow. I apologise if dreadful images become so ingrained inside your head that you can never rid yourself of them. I do not, however, apologise for what I have done. I feel no remorse whatsoever. I believe wholeheartedly that it was all entirely justified.

The best place to start is at the beginning.

Once, believe it or not, there was only one television channel. Available in monochrome and only at certain times of the day. If you are old enough to recall that bygone era, you will surely remember a puppet and string show called *The Adventures of Daisy Maisy*. You will remember at the start of each episode how the lady narrator, who was my grandmother, delivered a description of Daisy Maisy in that stiff and stuffy received pronunciation that was the standard back then.

"Here is Daisy Maisy," she'd intone. "*With her bright red hair, and her bright red lips, and perfect circles of red rouge on her cheeks. Can you see her blue saucer shaped eyes, children? And her yellow dress with the red polka dots?"*

As the show was broadcast in black and white this ingenious description was designed to fire the imagination of the young audience and get them thinking in colour. Over the years I have met many people who claim these words cast such a spell over them that they truly believed they were watching the show in colour. With what I know now, I am inclined, on occasions, to believe that it was a spell that my grandmother was weaving.

If you watched the show, you'll remember little sing song rhyme that started each episode and wormed its way into your head.

Daisy Maisy
A little bit lazy
Can't get out of bed
Daisy Maisy
A little bit lazy
Wake up, wake up sleepy head!

And how, on that last line, the puppet strings would jerk Daisy Maisy upright in her little wooden bed to judder stiff legged around her little room with her little wooden pets, Meow the Cat and Bark the Dog. Like children across the land you would have sat wide eyed before the television set, enjoying her adventures. If you don't remember any of this and are too young to have ever seen the show, ask your parents, or your grandparents. They will remember. It was very popular in its day.

I was the voice of Daisy Maisy.

Yes, that was me.

Gently scolding Meow and Bark for always getting into endless squabbles. Popping mischievously up from behind the rickety garden fence to shout *'boo'* at Bobby the Butcher's Boy on his wobbly wooden bike. Calling *'yoo-hoo'* to Parkinson the Park Keeper as I swung on the swings. That was me at the end of each episode saying sweetly – *'Goodnight. Sleep tight. Don't let the bedbugs bite.'*

My grandmother created Daisy Maisy.

We lived in her big house near Clapham Common, my mother and me. My mother was the main puppeteer, and the voice of many of the characters. The sets for the show were built in my grandmother's garden shed and her greenhouse. The garden became the park and swings. Everything was filmed there.

And I was the voice of Daisy Maisy. In fact, you could say that I was Daisy Maisy. My name is Daisy and Daisy Maisy was my grandmother's pet name for me. I was the inspiration for the character. Something that has always filled me with a deep sense of pride. In many ways the character herself shaped who I was to become in later life.

I loved being part of the show. Watching how the sets were designed and painted and assembled. Seeing how my mother and the other puppeteers deftly manipulated the strings of Daisy Maisy and all the characters that inhabited her world. Hearing my grandmother barking out directions and orders to her cameraman. Most of all I loved the little recording studio in our basement where I got to step up to the microphone and recite the lines that would accompany Daisy Maisy's adventures. I was only five and could scarcely read. My mother would teach me the lines and I would repeat them. My grandmother, who wrote all the adventures, kept Daisy's dialogue to simple sentences that I could easily remember.

It came as such a terrible, devastating shock when the show was cancelled. I cried for days on end. I was inconsolable. It felt like a bereavement. As if Daisy Maisy had died. As if I had died with her and become the ghost of myself.

At the click of some faceless executive's manicured fingers the puppets were stored away in packing crates. The sets were dismantled. The shed and the greenhouse became hollow husks. My grandmother upped sticks and retired to Greece. I wasn't aware at that point of the scandal that had enveloped her. They deliberately kept it from me.

As a consequence of the trauma I endured, I became quite introverted, escaping into a fantasy where I was Daisy Maisy and all was well in the happy and simple world I inhabited. I made up plots and new adventures to distract me from the mundane reality of everyday life. I played all day, from sunrise to sunset, in the park with Bobby the Butcher's Boy, and we would endlessly run and chase with Meow and Bark. For me the real world was monochrome. But the vividly imagined world of Daisy Maisy played out in sumptuous technicolour.

I was fourteen when I came across the newspaper clippings revealing the scandal which had led to the series being cancelled. I was home alone. Being a bit nosey. I found them in a little cardboard box under my mother's bed. I recognised my grandmother straight away from the pictures accompanying the articles. I spread the cuttings out on the bed and read them one by one.

My grandmother had been exposed as the author of a book called *'Witchcraft for Modern Times'*. It had only sold around three hundred copies. But the press made a veritable banquet out of the implications. She was alleged to have been the High Priestess of a coven who had procured an incubus lover for my mother. The puppets in Daisy Maisy were apparently inspired by voodoo dolls.

But it was the allegations about what Meow and Bark were saying during their weekly squabbles that truly sealed the fate of Daisy Maisy. In the show the pets could talk, But not in any recognisable language. It was little more than nonsensical gobbledygook, voiced by my mother. But, according to the headlines that screamed from various front pages, Meow and Bark were reciting satanic incantations, intended to thoroughly corrupt the children of the nation.

When I read this, I immediately started to wonder if I might be the spawn of my mother's supernatural lover. The incubus allegedly summoned by my grandmother and her coven. I had never known my father. Never heard him spoken of. Had not been able to locate so much as single photograph of him. Maybe it was true. Maybe my father taught my mother to speak the occult language of tongues. And she, in turn, was spreading satanic verses.

Curiosity aroused I snuck down to the old recording studio in the basement and smuggled one of the two Daisy Maisy puppets stored there up to my room. I stared into her blue, saucer eyes. "If you are some sort of voodoo doll," I said. "I bet I can get you to do all sorts of things for me. Especially if I am the daughter of a demon." She smiled back at me with those red lips that curved in a frozen arc toward her rouged wooden cheeks.

For the next two or three years I would ask her to spite and smite other girls at secondary school who'd been rude to me or slighted me in some other way. Sometimes little coincidental incidents would occur. To my pubescent logic, this confirmed Daisy Maisy's occult potency. If Mary Travers lost her maths book and got double detention, that was down to me and Daisy Maisy. If Jennifer Black tripped on her lace and fell down the stairs so hard it gave her a bloody nose, that was down to me and Daisy Maisy. If Rowena Clackson got caught shoplifting in Woolworths, that was down to me and Daisy Maisy.

They say that if you meddle in dark things dark things come back to punish you. If that is true then I suppose over the years I accrued a substantial debt that was bound to be collected in a big. It happed on a spring day when both my mother and grandmother died in a head on collision on one of the winding coastal roads on the Greek coastline. I was nineteen at the time and away at university, sulking that I

hadn't been invited to join them. If I'd have gone, I had planned to confront the two of them about the newspaper cuttings and finally force them to reveal the truth about my mysterious father. But it wasn't to be. Neither of them would countenance me interrupting my studies. In the pokey little room of my student accommodation I petulantly demanded to Daisy Maisy that she intervene to spoil their fun.

Careful what you wish for, as they say.

My inheritance was the old house on Clapham Common, along with Daisy Maisy and her wooden entourage. There were two sets of puppets for each character. I sold one complete set at auction. The scandal still attached to them from years earlier gave them a morbid provenance which helped fetch quite a handsome price.

Set up for life, I decided that my new mission would be to lure Bobby the Butcher's Boy into my arms. Jason Bainbridge, the actor who had voiced him, was three years older than me. But since childhood I'd nurtured a crush on him. His eyes were green. His hair was brown. His teeth were perfect and pearly white. His chin was square. His nose was narrow. In real life I thought he looked like the puppet of his puppet. I adored him. In my little fantasy world Daisy and Bobby had grown up and were married, living in perfect bliss in a little pink cottage on the edge of a big, wide meadow, with Meow and Bark for company.

I often saw him on TV. He'd cornered the market for bad boy roles. Frequently playing juvenile delinquents on police series and soap operas. More recently he'd been playing the notorious chocolate thief in a highly popular advertising campaign for a new snack bar that had been launched by a major confectioner.

I looked into Daisy Maisy's big saucer eyes and beseeched her to engineer a meeting between us. Nothing happened for a while. I was used to that. Daisy Maisy was often slow to respond to my requests. But then a journalist from a women's magazine contacted me out of the blue. She was planning a series of 'where are they now?' interviews and thought the voice of Daisy Maisy would be of interest to the readers in her target demographic.

I agreed on two conditions. Firstly, no mention of the witchcraft scandal. Secondly, it should be a joint interview with Jason Bainbridge, the actor who had voiced Bobby the Butcher's Boy. She didn't need much convincing. Jason's chocolate thief persona had, by then, made him a minor celebrity. He was opening summer fetes all over the country.

At a post interview dinner, I discovered that he was secretly engaged to an actress called Susan Tanner. They had met two years earlier on the set of a teen horror movie. He spoke to me as if I were simply an old friend. Told me how he longed to spend the rest his life with Susan, who was the love of his life. How could Bobby the Butcher's Boy love someone else when he was destined to be with Daisy Maisy? Under the table my hands trembled with rage. My fingernails dug so deep into my flesh that my palms bled. But I smiled sweetly and wished him well.

Later, back home, I begged Daisy Maisy to conjure up a fatal accident for Miss Susan Tanner. Nothing at all happened. No matter how I begged and pleaded. Nothing ever happened to Susan Tanner. As their careers progressed, they were often pictured together in the show biz gossip columns of newspapers and magazines. I cut them all out and taped them to the walls in the basement beside my grandmother's cuttings. I would take Daisy Maisy's puppet down there and hold her up front of them. "Her," I would rant, shaking Daisy Maisy till her wooden limbs rattled. "That blond bitch his trying to steal our Bobby from us. Do something, would you? Run her down with a bus. Drown her in the sea. Electrocute her with a faulty socket."

Nothing.

Daisy Maisy let me down.

I was on my own.

I didn't allow that to deter me.

Once they were married, I kept in touch with Jason. His oldest 'friend', as I put it. Slowly and surely, I diligently wormed my way into his affections. When Susan had given birth to two kids, who exhausted her so completely that she lost all interest in sex, I made my move to establish myself as the other woman. It didn't take much to lure Jason into my bed. Perhaps Daisy Maisy did have a hand in it after all?

I was reasonably content playing the mistress, although I would frequently set Daisy Maisy on my lap and beg her to arrange for Susan to trip on a toy at the top of the stair and break her neck in the fall.

Or maybe she could have a fatal reaction to a bug one of the kids picked up at school. Something involving a faulty vacuum cleaner perhaps? Or a gas leak? Nothing untoward happened, and, as the years rolled on, I realised I was going to end up a lonely old woman. Jason was never going to be mine and mine alone. Daisy and Bobby would never be together in that little pink cottage by the meadow.

Jason's kids grew up and flew the nest. I begged him to leave Susan. There was nothing stopping him. He said that although he no longer loved her, he couldn't do anything that might damage his relationship with his son and daughter. He now had grandkids to consider into the bargain. Also the scandal might scupper the revival his career was enjoying as result of being cast in as an aging vampire in a new Netflix fantasy series.

I should have ended it there and then. That would have been the sensible thing to do. That would have been the dignified thing to do. Had I done so you, who found me, might have been spared the scene you stumbled upon. Instead, I decided that if I couldn't have him, neither could Susan, or his children, or, for that matter, his grandchildren. If Daisy Maisy wouldn't help me, I would have to help myself once more.

I sent Jason a text.

"Come round tonight. I have a sexy surprise."

His eyes almost popped out on stalks when I opened the door.

I was dressed as Daisy Maisy. Only Daisy Maisy as a seductress. Polka dot dress, low cut to my cleavage. Hem up to my thighs. Stocking and suspenders instead of yellow ankle socks. Circles of rouge on my cheeks. Big, fluttering false eyelashes. Even in my 60's I thought I made up extremely well.

"Go and hide," I cooed, pouting my red lips, and handing him the butcher's boy costume I'd had made for him. "When I find you Daisy and Bobby are finally going to get it on."

He flushed and dashed upstairs, panting heavily. I didn't count to ten. Instead, I recited the little, self-aware version of Daisy Maisy's theme song that I had composed.

Daisy Maisy
A little bit crazy
Such thoughts inside your head
Daisy Maisy
A little bit crazy
That rat will soon be dead!

"Coming, ready or not," I called.

I picked up my axe, babbling away in the satanic gobbledygook my mother had invented for Meow and Bark. The lines fell so easily from my tongue, filling me with an invigorating wickedness. Jason hadn't made much of an effort to hide. He was sprawled out on my bed, dressed in the Butcher's Boy costume, huge bulge in his short trousers.

Chop-chop -chop I went with my axe.

He screamed.

Chop-chop-chop.

He fell silent.

Chop-chop-chop.

He was like a puppet dismantled.

All limbs and head and torso.

Entrails for strings.

My demonic father, if he existed, would have been so very proud of me.

My hands were caked in gore. My face was splattered with blood. I began work on Jason's dismembered body. Drilling holes and fixing bolts to re-join him at his joints. Dressing him again in the second grown-up interpretation of Bobby the Butcher's Boy's costume I'd had made.

He was heavy. I strained and groaned as I dragged his reconstructed cadaver out to the garden shed. Then, wrapping his entrails around the ropes I tied to his legs and arms I hauled him up to dance and jig in front the set I had constructed from props stored in the basement. The interior of the little village church that had appeared in episodes five and nine of the original show.

As you will see when you find me, I had set out all the other puppet characters as a congregation. Of course, they were all invited to the wedding. Meow was the Maid of Honour, Bark was Best Man to Bobby. It was to be the talk of the village. The wedding of the year. After the honeymoon we were to set up home in a little pink cottage by the meadow. I took my rightful place next to Bobby the Butcher's Boy and gazed lovingly into his glassy eyes.

This was the sequel to the show I had longed for over the years.

The New Adventures of Daisy Maisy were about to commence.

"I do," I said, when the puppet of the Reverend Richardson posed the question in my head. And in my head Bobby gave the same answer. I worked his hand so he could slip the wooden wedding ring I'd made onto my finger. Then I raised my chin and kissed his cold dead lips.

And now I finish my note to you who will find me here with my endless love. In a moment I will step up onto the stool and drop the noose around my neck. And when I kick away the stool Daisy Maisy will dance like a puppet on a string to be with Bobby the Butcher's Boy for ever and ever. Just as I planned it. Just as it was always meant to be.

All that is left for me to do is to finally close this episode of my show with the words I made famous back in those innocent days when there was only one monochrome TV channel. When Daisy Maisy was watched by children across the land. When Jason was Bobby, and he was destined to be my own true love.

"*Goodnight. Sleep tight. Don't let the bedbugs bite."*

Death of a Doll's House Spider (Gary Budgen)

Amy's mother stood at the bottom of the stairs, shouting up to Amy's father who'd occupied an obscure attic ever since the accident.

"They're like sisters now. She's got in with that Elizabeth Winter." She waited but there was no response. "She's a favourite. It's a chance for something better than all this…"

"Winters, bloody Winters," came the croaking replay from up in the rafters. "They were called Winterbottom till the dad changed the name. Didn't like the bottom. Thought it reminded people of an arse. And that wife of his is a stuck-up tart."

"She's very glamourous."

"A tart."

His phlegmy laugh erupted, followed by the thumps and scrapes of his crutches as he made his way down from the attic to the toilet.

"They're just like sisters," Amy's mother said again.

But of course, they were not sisters.

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When Amy entered the house of Elizabeth Winter, she became Amelia. Mrs. Winter in her tailored suits, her pearls and earrings, addressed her in a series of clipped instructions.

'Amelia, sit up straight.'

'Amelia, have you washed your hands?'

'Now you two go and play.'

Amy ran with Elizabeth down the long hallway towards the stairs while Mrs. Winter told the ladies who came for morning coffee: 'It is so good for someone like Amelia, someone from her background, to come here. Don't you think?'

The house was clean and light. It smelt of furniture polish. The hallway had two little tables with half-moon tops on which were placed vases and statuettes, all too expensive to touch. There were paintings on the wall, landscapes done in sickly pastel shades.

Amy moved through the house as though it were merely a backdrop. This wasn't the house she was interested in. If Mrs. Winter knew how little all the carefully curated trappings affected the child, she might go in search of another unfortunate as a plaything for her daughter. A child who was more appreciative.

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Upstairs there was a big room full of toys that was not Elizabeth's bedroom. Once it would have been called a nursery, now it was called the playroom.

"You have to see," Elizabeth said, "what Daddy bought me for the drawing room."

They approached the doll's house, Elizabeth rushing ahead, allowing Amy only a moment of reverence in which to admire its exterior. It was a double-fronted three-storey townhouse, with huge bay windows either side of the elaborately columned portico. The walls were painted to give the effect of grey Portland stone. In fact, the doll's house resembled the real house, although Amy had hardly registered that.

"Look, look." Elizabeth pulled the hinged front of the doll's house open.

Over the months Amy had been coming here she had seen the doll's house gradually furnished with gifts to Elizabeth. Gifts to Elizabeth did not require any occasion.

The drawing room was the focus of recent attention. With a sofa and armchair of Morocco leather, a wooden travelling trunk with brass fittings, a set of nesting tables and a standing lamp that actually worked, lighting up a pleated yellow lampshade.

“There,” Elizabeth said, “It’s called a chaise longue.”

It was another type of sofa as far as Amy could tell, but one that had a backrest at one end only. Its colour chimed with the gold of the lampshade and, when Elizabeth turned the lamp on and moved it next to the new piece of furniture, the whole of the doll’s house drawing room glowed with a soft golden light that caressed the air around it. Amy reached out, wanting to touch that miraculous light.

There was a sharp pain as Elizabeth smacked Amy’s hand.

“No touching. You know you’re not supposed to touch.”

Tears bubbled up on the ridge of Amy’s eyes and she willed them not to fall, made herself not wipe them away with the sleeve of her cardigan. Instead, she turned her face away.

Elizabeth was screaming, running away and calling for her mother. It was only when Amy looked back at the doll’s house drawing room that she understood the screams had nothing to do with her.

There, sat on the chaise longue, bathed in the golden light, was a spider. Its many legs were sprawled out. Its body was like grey velvet. It had a narrow creamy stripe running across its back and over the great bulbous abdomen.

Behind her Amy heard Elizabeth clatter down the wooden stairs.

Soon Mrs. Winter would come. She would wield a rolled-up fashion magazine and flick the spider onto the playroom floor where, with the toe of her beautiful stiletto shoe, she would squish it into a stain.

Amy wiped the remnants of tears from her eyes and then with a slowness she had never had before she moved her hand into the doll’s house and picked up the little travelling trunk. The spider, sensing something, twitched and almost took a step along the chaise longue. Then Amy struck, she flipped open the lid, she cupped the trunk over the spider and tipped the chaise longue so the spider spilled inside the trunk.

By the time Elizabeth and Mrs. Winter arrived the miniature drawing room was carefully back in order and the travelling trunk tucked inside Any’s sleeve.

“It’s gone,” Amy said.

“You see,” said Mrs. Winter, “a lot of fuss over nothing.”

Elizabeth peered in. She will notice something. She will notice…

“I’m scared,” Elizabeth said.

“Stuff and nonsense.”

“It’s still here, it’s still in the playroom.”

She looked up at her mother, demanding something be done.

“Well, I’ll look. You two go and watch something on the television.”

“I need the toilet,” Amy said.

“We don’t call it that, do we, Amelia?”

While the water ran into the sink Amy checked the spider was content. It was a little cramped but began to stir so she closed the lid. She kept the trunk in her sleeve until at last it was time to go home.

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In bed she held the travelling trunk to her stomach beneath her blankets. She waited for silence but heard her father moving, dragging his ruined legs behind his crutches, coughing as he went. There came the clumps as he negotiated the steps down from his attic to go into the room where her mother slept.

Amy heard him panting, the bed creaking and squeaking, until at last a door opened and he clomped out again. The toilet flushed before he went up the stairs again.

She turned on her light, opened the doll’s travelling trunk and tipped the spider into an old shortbread tin. She’d emptied out the pre-decimal coins, ribbons and stones she’d kept there. The spider took a few steps. It was probably limping because one of its legs must have been crushed a little inside the miniature trunk.

What should she do? She should feed it. Spiders ate flies. So, she’d put a bit of sugar down and catch flies. One after the other she would pluck them off the sugar and feed them into the willing mouth of the spider. It was a delicious thought that warmed her, that let her drift off, at last, to sleep.

In the morning her mother burst into her room.

“I’ve had Mrs. Winter on the phone. I said to her, she must be mistaken, not my Amy, no my Amy wouldn’t steal.”

But there it was, upturned and forsaken on the bed, the carefully crafted, perfectly to scale, wooden and bras, doll’s travelling trunk. No attention at all was paid to the shortbread tin.

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“What I don’t understand,” said Mrs. Winter, as Amy stood in their lounge, her own mother there, Elizabeth too. “What I don’t understand is why you would do such a thing. Haven’t we, after all, treated you well enough? Haven’t we made you part of the family, almost? What have you got to say for yourself Amelia, hmm?”

Mrs. Winter was not cross, not really. There was a satisfaction in her Amy could see as easily as the lifeless pearls she wore around her neck.

“Well?”

But Amy said nothing. Back home in the little room the spider would be waiting. She would feed it flies and watch it grow until it filled her world.

On the doorstep Mrs. Winter looked down at her, fixing her with a long stare before turning to her mother.

“I think it would be best if Amelia doesn’t visit for a time, don’t you?”

Behind her, seen along the long corridor, Elizabeth stood at the bottom of the stairs. Her face was perfectly without expression. In her hand was the little travelling trunk, a piece of luggage for a doll who would one day travel the world, ride railway trains and cross great oceans on a steamer. A doll who would remain forever untouched by all the marvellous places she would visit.

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“Well, that’s that,” Amy’s mother said. “She might have done you a lot of good, you should have kept in with her.” They trudged back, moving away from the clean and tidy streets with the big houses to where whole rows of hovels had been squeezed together to fit into spaces too small for them.

At home Amy’s mother shouted up the stairs.

“It’s all gone wrong. She’s ruined it at the Winters’.

Thump. Scrape. A distant door opened. Then, throughout the house, the echo of it moving as though it were a creature with its own will, her father’s phlegmy laughter ran and danced.

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The spider did not thrive. One of its legs was indeed broken, useless. It was unable to move beyond a feeble shuffling and it began to change. Slowly, in a succession of beautiful moments, spasms, twitching and finally paralysis, it shrunk, curled and folded in on itself. Eventually it became a dry speck, indistinguishable from dust.

Years later she would know all there was to know about it. That creature oh so full of itself as it luxuriated on the chaise longue. The nursery web spider. This one a female who mated only after a ritual where the male offered up an insect wrapped in silk.

For now though, through childhood and into a dark adolescence, it was enough to understand that everything the world held precious, spiders and doll’s houses with their tiny pieces of furniture, glamourous mothers in pearls and stiletto shoes, all would eventually decay and become a grey detritus.

There is no horror here. No, nothing of the sort. Just the house, her father’s laughter and the vast nothing of the spider’s existence. She thought about all that would die. Of all the pleasures to come.

Fan (Liam A. Spinage)

1952. A wireless crackles in the background, forgotten amidst the hubbub of a suburban kitchen on a Monday morning. It will be a while before that tumult dies down and allows me the precious hours we spend alone; sitting back in the solitary armchair I could afford, the volume up, oblivious to the world outside, to everything apart from the sound of your voice. I was lost in those times until I found you. It did not occur to me until many years later that I would inevitably play a part in your ending.

It is difficult to articulate how meaningful I found that experience, albeit at a tender age when - looking back now - it is obvious to me that I really knew nothing. I would lay awake with only the sound of your voice for company.

I became obsessed.

The pathology of stalkers has been well mapped by our criminal psychologists and displayed endlessly on the televisions which have become so prevalent in our society. Endless blood, endless murder. We study them as much as the police. We gaze into the abyss and are unsurprised to find it comforting. We embrace it when it gazes back, because deep down we know it was in us all along.

Your early work, you see, had merit. Everyone knew it. You yourself clearly did; I certainly did. You sang with a voice so enchanting it took us all to a happier place.

What happened to that young man I idolized? Why have things come to this?

Nothing immediately jumps out at me. There was no sudden change in your well documented career, no discernable break in your pitch or tone. A gradual decline in quality even as your career skyrocketed. Not everyone heard it. Only those of us fans - true fans - who listened to those records over and over and over until we knew you better than we knew ourselves, better than you knew you.

And then I met you. I was at the front of the line just as you came offstage. You must have seen me. Your eyes lingered overlong, overfriendly. As I moved to speak, you blanked me. Turned your back. Imagine! You, turning your back on me. I was your number one fan until I met you. Until I saw how cold and callous those eyes had turned. How empty your heart was.

After I met you, everything changed. I saw you everywhere. In every failed interview, every failed relationship, every arrogant passer-by on the street who nudged me as they walked by, oblivious to my pain and sadness.

It wasn't me who made me obsessed with you. You did that. Your voice, the pleasure it gave me. It wasn't me who betrayed you, either. You did that too. How many letters unreplied to? How many calls unreturned?

I was studying acoustics in those days, working part time in a studio to pay the bills.

I still am, in fact. I've spent every working day trying to improve the studio experience for you. For everyone. There's a lot I could tell the world about what I've learned. A whole lot. But most of all, I've learned that some people aren't meant to survive in this new world. There have been so many improvements in voice technology. It can't improve on your voice though. That will always be perfect.

Funny how I can't really move on. How every waking moment of idol worship rebounds on you. My wall is still covered in your photographs. They're slashed through now, most of them, in wine-fueled anger. Red lines cross the early ones. I've taken scissors to your eyes, of course. Now they stare down at me hollow and empty, just as you did. I hate the way you look, but what I hate more is the way you looked at me. Just that one time. Just for a moment. That moment is my every sleeping moment, my every nightmare. When I wake, your gaze is no longer on me. It hurts, being awake. It sends me into convulsions, fits of spluttering rage, lost weekends in fleapit basements reeking of marijuana and cheap vodka, days after days of staring into nothingness, night after night of plotting revenge. Lying awake, intent on turning on you.

Why can't you see me? Why won't you notice the love that's right in front of you?

I'll tell you what I did next, shall I?

I met your children.

What did you tell them? They seemed to be expecting me. Have I become enough of a threat that you actually warned them about me?

How touching. Finally, you're starting to pay attention.

And now I understand the problem, you see. How to get your attention. How to make sure you finally look at me. How to be seen.

They're with me now, your children. Don't worry, they're safe.

For now.

We should meet, you and me. There's this abandoned studio over on 22nd Street. I'm sure you know the one I mean. It's where you made your first voice recording, so many years ago. They took the credit for that second symphony of yours. Then the lawsuits came flying - which you won of course, with those tears in the courtroom, those honeyed words in that silken voice.

I own that old studio now. It will be a fitting reminder of the gulf between us, the years that have gone by. I will best you where they failed. We can listen to the sounds of your screams, rewritten by machine on my new technology. A symphony of suffering unsurpassed since your second album.

Do you remember how that used to go? Or is the playback too long ago? No matter. The music we will make tonight will be sweeter than anything.

You'll want proof, I suppose. I've attached two pictures to this letter. No doubt when it comes it will break your heart.

Neither of us are likely to survive. We can die together, like Romeo and Juliet. They'll find us, arms entwined as our souls should have been. Your children will take that story to the world. I can make sure they come out of this safely.

But not you.

Not me.

We won't make it.

There's no 'you and me' anymore, there's only 'us'. There never was anyone else for me, you see. You were the first one. You were the last one. I never loved another. Unlike you. For so long, 'Us' was the only dream I had. The only thing that kept me alive. And now, it will be the thing that kills us both and ensures that we are together, forever.

So please, come and meet me in the abandoned studio. I'll be waiting. I've been waiting all my life. And please, don't involve the police if you know what's good for you and yours. And no pleading. I know your voice is magical, but I am no longer under your spell in that way. There's no way out. I'm afraid this is inevitable now between us.

I can't rewind, you see. I've come too far.

Yours, forever…

A FAN

When They Come For You (Thomas M. Malafarina)

Darkness surrounded him. It was not the pitch-black sort of darkness where nothing at all could be seen but more of a gloomy semi-darkness. He was having trouble focusing, unsure of where he was. He could determine he was lying on his back with his head either propped up with pillows or elevated in some other fashion, perhaps by some adjustable bed. He felt a dull burning pain radiating from the center of his chest in all directions. As bad as this might feel, his surroundings' disorientation and dreamlike quality were even more disturbing.

He could hear the beeping and humming of electronic machinery all around him, but he couldn't recall where he was or why he was lying in this strange gloomy place accompanied only by the sounds of machines. He couldn't quite even remember his own name. His mind was clouded; feeling like he had been given some mind-altering drug.

Then he slowly began to remember; drugs. Yes, that's exactly what it was; drugs for the pain. He had been given large doses of medications. Morphine was one of the drugs being fed into his body to help with … with the pain. It was all gradually returning to him in disjointed fragments of lost memories.

At last he recalled who he was, then sadly, where and why. He realized he probably would have been better off not remembering after all. His name was Salvador, Salvador Monroe, known to his friends as Sal or Sallie. He was in bed in a hospital, not a hospital but a hospice center. And he was dying.

Through the drug-induced fog, which he recognized was barely doing anything to dampen the searing agony in his cancer-riddled lungs, Sal understood one thing clearer than anything else; his remaining time was short … very short. He sensed he was extremely weak, too weak even to raise his head, but he could still manage to slowly move his eyes about to take in most of the room. He could see he was all alone. Where was his wife? Where was Charlotte? She promised she wouldn't leave but stay with him until the end. Where was she now?

Sal suddenly began to panic. He had known for months he was dying, but now he had a feeling, a certain intuition that the end was close by and yet here he was … alone. Sal didn't want to die alone. He wouldn't allow himself to die alone. Despite the pain, he was determined to hang on for as long as possible. He wanted to wait for his beloved wife to return. Where was Charlotte? He couldn't cross over without saying one last goodbye to his wife.

Across the room, beyond his ability to focus within the gloom, Sal saw something; the slightest of movements, almost imperceptible but enough motion to capture his attention. What was that moving over there? Was it his wife sitting quietly in the darkness? Lord, he hoped so. He tried to speak, form the words, call out her name but could not. His throat and lips were parched. He wanted something to drink or perhaps some ice chips to chew on, anything to quench the thirst. And God help him; he needed more morphine to dull his ever-increasing pain.

Sal looked closer and realized what he was seeing was not Charlotte. It was someone, no something else entirely. A faint glow seemed to be emitting from that darkest corner of the room. It was pulsating and appeared to be of no definite form, its shape changing continuously. At first, Sal had no idea what to make of the strange phenomenon. He was almost certain it was some illusion or hallucination brought on by the drugs, yet he could see it so clearly.

Then Sal experienced an awareness, a knowing of sorts. Even though his eyes saw nothing more than an effervescent shapeless mass floating mid-air, his mind was experiencing a completely different picture. He saw his long-dead father. Sal's dad had passed away some thirty years earlier, following a sudden, massive heart attack when Sal was about twenty-nine. Yet no, his father appeared before him, smiling with a peaceful and content expression, the likes of which Sal had never quite seen cross the man's face. He appeared as he had when still tall, strong and handsome, with coal-black hair just beginning to show hints of silver. "Popa," Sal said without speaking as his lips silently formed the words. The specter across the room neither replied nor moved; it just stood staring with that strange, peaceful smile.

Sal had always loved and respected his father and mourned his passing for what seemed like years. Since then, barely a day passed by without some recollection of his father popping into his mind. He often

laughed at how he noticed things about himself as he got older, things which mirrored memories of his late Popa. Sal felt tears welling up in the corners of his eyes and didn't bother trying to stop them when they overflowed and trickled down his cheeks. God, how he missed his father! He had forgotten just how much.

Then he saw two more glowing objects forming on both sides of the first. Soon these illusions took shape in his mind and Sal immediately recognized one as his mother, who had passed on fifteen years after his father. The other was his older brother Anthony who had been killed in the jungles of Vietnam when Sal entered his first year of high school on September 17, 1969. It was a date Sal would never forget.

The countenance of his mother was as he remembered her from back when he was a young boy. He loved his mother with all his heart and thought she was the most beautiful woman ever to walk the earth. And now she stood to one side of her husband, his father, looking more radiant than Sal's finest memory could recall. And on the opposite side of his father stood Anthony, still wearing his trademark mischievous grin, the one that always drove the girls in his high school wild.

Sal lay helpless in his bed, unable to determine what this vision, hallucination or whatever it was might mean. Yet, at the same time he was enjoying the feeling of seeing his departed family members once again. A realization suddenly hit him and Sal instantly understood why they were there; they had come for him. Sal had heard stories through the years of family members near death who claimed that long-lost relatives had come to guide them to the afterlife. About twenty years ago, when his father's brother, Sal's Uncle Mike, had passed away, his aunt Gertrude had told him that in her husband's final moments of life, she heard him speaking to someone across the room who she couldn't see. Gert had told Sal he had identified the invisible being as his brother, Sal's father. She was certain he had come to guide Mike to the other side. She told young Sal that he should be sure to do what his spirit guide instructed when his time came. She said, "Sallie, when they come for you, it's your time to go and you should not resist."

She told him she had no idea what might happen if someone refused to go with them, but it couldn't be good. "You don't mess with such things, Sallie." she had said. "They come for a reason, maybe to protect you from something … something else … I don't know. But I do know that when the time comes, you just must let go." Several years later, that was exactly what she had done when it was her time to pass on.

Sal had always thought his aunt Gert might have been a little bit "off," but now, all these many years later, he understood she had been right and that was why his family was here; to help him cross over to whatever awaited him in the afterlife. And in his heart, Sal knew he should go with them; it was his time. They were his family and he missed them all so much. Sal understood that all he had to do was let go and he would be free to cross over to a better place to be with his loved ones. At that moment, Sal wanted to go with them more than almost anything else he could imagine … but then he suddenly experienced a brief pang of doubt and realized he couldn't go with them, at least not yet. He knew the choice to leave or stay was still his to make. And yet as much as he wanted to follow them, he owed it to his loving wife to stay, if just for another day or even a few more hours or minutes. He had unfinished business on this side. Sal wanted to tell Charlotte how much he loved her, how grateful he had been for her taking care of him during his prolonged illness and, most importantly, he wanted to say goodbye. Was that too much to ask? She deserved at least that much and he wouldn't leave the planet until he had done so.

Across the room, his father, mother, and brother's peaceful smiling expressions began to darken, replaced by looks of distress and disappointment. They somehow had sensed his intentions. They looked as though they wanted to try and persuade him but were helpless to do anything but stare at him despondently. Finally, his father appeared to be straining with all of his strength. He slowly lifted one of his arms and extended his hand, palm up in one last pleading gesture for Sal to come with them. Tears streamed down his face and Sal sent a thought across the room, between the two worlds. That thought was how much he loved and missed them, but he couldn't go with them. Then the three images began to dissolve and fade away with the glowing lights from which they had appeared.

It was only then Sal realized when the spirits had been present, all the pain from his cancer had disappeared. Now, however, it was returning with a vengeance. His chest seared with agony as the disease, which had been eating him alive from the inside out, resumed its deadly feast. He also

experienced something else, not something tangible or anything he could accurately explain, except that it was a feeling of total loss, a sense of being left behind. Images passed through his mind of a lone man standing in the dark at a railway station as a train pulled away. He somehow understood he had just refused what was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

Tears still coursed down his face uncontrollably, but they were no longer tears of joy from seeing his family, they were now tears of mourning for the emptiness he felt inside now that they were gone. It was as if his family had just died all over again. But somehow it was worse than simply that. Previously, he hoped he might see them again someday, but now there was a real fear that he was lost to them forever.

Sal saw something else across the room through his glistening tears, another glowing shapeless mass. He felt his heart race with excitement at the possibility his family might have sensed his distress and returned for him. If so, he knew he would go with them now, despite not having said goodbye to Charlotte. He was ready. However, he noticed this glow seemed somewhat different than the previous. It was not as bright and was yellow and crimson.

The image that gradually appeared in his mind when he looked into the light was not his father, mother or brother. The visage was that of a young woman. She was rail-thin with long scraggly filthy and unkempt hair. She was dressed in dirty, soiled white pajamas that appeared saturated with gelatinous fluid and were practically see-through. However, nothing was alluring about the vision as the woman was gaunt and her minimal breasts hung down like shriveled prunes. Her sallow cheeks were enhanced by the sunken dark-ringed eyes which seemed to bug out of her skull. Something about the woman seemed distantly familiar, but Sal couldn't quite place her.

Her mouth hung slack-jawed and was a reddish-black hole. Her lips were gone on the left side of the deformed opening, revealing a staggered row of sporadically missing and chipped teeth. It appeared as if her face had been through some explosion. Several wisps of black smoke seeped out of the malformed orifice to further solidify this impression, making it appear like some ghastly flesh-covered chimney.

The woman turned her head slowly to the left as if to display something on her right side that Sal sensed she wanted him to see, which he instinctively knew he would not. Sadly he was correct. The entire right side of her skull was gone. In its place was an enormous gaping hole oozing a mixture of blood, fragments of flesh and a gooey gray substance, which Sal believed must have once been brain matter. Swarms of some buzzing insects, perhaps flies, flew about the opening while more wisps of smoke leaked from the dripping gash.

At first Sal was still uncertain who the woman might be or why she had appeared to him, but then the shock of recognition hit him like a club to the side of his skull. "Meghan?" he thought questioningly. The specter across the room nodded slightly in acknowledgment of his realization. "Oh, my sweet God in Heaven! Sal thought, "Oh no. Please no! Not this! Don't let it be her. Not Meghan!"

There had been very few things in Sal's life he could honestly say he was sorry about and for which he felt guilty or ashamed. But what had happened to Meghan and his part in the horrible incident was something that had haunted him his entire life. And now the memories flooded back as if they were happening again.

Sal had been dating a beautiful young woman named Meghan Reilly some thirty years earlier. She was a widow with two young preschool children. Her husband had tragically died when struck by a drunk driver. During Sal's time with Meghan, her two little ones had become very attached to him. Since they could barely remember their late father, he became their surrogate dad.

The affair had been going strong for close to a year. At least on Meghan's part, there was an apparent unspoken understanding that their relationship would eventually result in marriage. But then, something began to change for Sal. Over the previous six months he noticed many instances where Meghan had acted in a very strange, unpredictable way, leading him to believe that she might be bipolar or maybe there was just something a bit unstable about the woman. The last thing he wanted at a young age was to spend the rest of his life with a woman whose emotions had become so unpredictable. He also couldn't see himself committing to taking on her two children as his own. Thinking about the potential problems was becoming overwhelming for him.

The result was, he became distant, unwilling to face the inevitable and perhaps hoping she would grow tired of him and break off the relationship. But she didn't. He then realized that he would have to be the one to end things. Sal was not good at confrontation, so he subtly tried to cut the emotional ties with

Meghan further, spending less time with her and going out at night alone to local bars. But it seemed the more he tried to pull away from her, the more Meghan attempted to draw him closer. Eventually, Sal had no other option but to break up with her. One night while sitting at home alone contemplating his dilemma, he called Meghan and ended their relationship over the phone after a few glasses of liquid courage, an act Sal later would come to see as avoidance bordering on cowardice.

Meghan was devastated and heartbroken. For her, the emotional pain became unbearable. Only having been widowed for a few years, the wound was still fresh and Sal's leaving her was as if she had lost her husband all over again. Then one night, after drinking herself into a stupor, she called Sal, cursing him for what he had done to her and her children. She was screaming and sobbing, using profanities he had never heard her use before. He could hear her kids crying in the background.

She said she couldn't stand living with the pain he had caused and would kill her children and then herself. Then he would surely be sorry for what he had done,and her suffering would be over. Sal was fairly certain her threats were nothing more than her way of getting him to come to her place to discuss the situation face-to-face. But he had no intention of doing that. He had made up his mind and they were finished as far as he was concerned. Sal did his best to reason with her but found it difficult because of her drunken state, her deteriorated mental condition and the constant noise of her children crying in the background. Megan screamed at the top of her lungs for the kids to be quiet, but the wailing continued even louder than before. That was until Sal heard two quick shots and the crying ceased.

Sal felt his stomach clench when realizing what Meghan had just done. He was in shock and couldn't believe what he had just heard. He hoped he was mistaken and Meghan had maybe just shot into the air. Then perhaps the children had fled from the room. But deep in his heart, he knew this was all just wishful thinking. Meghan came back on the line, screaming even more hysterically than ever, "This is all your fault, Sal. You did this. YOU DID THIS! You killed my babies and now you'll kill me too. But I swear I'll be back for you, Sal. You can bet your worthless life I will." Then Sal heard the final gunshot. He stood in shock momentarily before placing the receiver back on its cradle.

A few minutes later, after composing himself, Sal contacted the local police, telling them the whole story, including his breakup with Meghan. He gave them her address, said he had not left his home and would wait there to speak to them if necessary. The deaths were eventually ruled murder-suicide committed by a despondent woman who had experienced a psychotic break. But Sal knew he was the catalyst that drove her over the edge.

A few months later, when things quietened down, Sal moved away and started a new life far from his unpleasant past in a part of the country where no one knew him. And although time passed and most local people had forgotten about the incident, Sal could never completely come to terms with his role in Meghan's death. It had haunted him for the rest of his life.

All these years later Meghan was back just as she had promised him, standing in spirit, ruined and broken across the room from his deathbed while he lay helplessly suffering in his final agony. The hideous specter didn't speak but smiled knowingly at Sal with what remained of her shattered mouth. Sal wanted to scream for help or cry out to anyone who might come and make this foul hell-spawned creature leave him to die in peace, but he could not.

A moment later, as if in answer to an unspoken prayer, he heard the door to his room open and his wife Charlotte slowly entered. He could see the illumination from the hall corridor backlighting her and making her look almost angelic. The door closed, the light receded and Charlotte went across the room to Sal's bedside, where she took a tissue from the nightstand and gently dabbed the tears from his glistening cheeks. Sal could still see the Meghan creature lurking in the shadows as if waiting patiently in anticipation of something, perhaps waiting for him.

Charlotte patted Sal's cheek and one of her fingers gently brushed against his skin. When her flesh met his, Sal's mind flooded with a montage of incredible images. He saw numerous scenes simultaneously played out like a collection of movies, each featuring Charlotte in various beds with many of his closest friends naked, sweating and grunting like rutting beasts. How could this possibly be? How could his beloved Charlotte have done such a thing to him? And why would she have done so while he lay dying in his hospital bed in unspeakable pain and beeping machines serving as his only companions?

Sal's eyes grew large with shock and his mouth flew open, astounded by what he had just witnessed. He wanted to believe none of what he saw was true, but he knew with certainty the images were far more than simple illusions or hallucinations brought on by the drugs. They were a montage of the truth of what his deceitful wife had been doing behind his back while she was pretending to care for him. He glanced across the room and saw the hideous specter of Meghan staring back at him, grinning madly with what remained of her mangled face. She knew what he had just seen and now she was basking in the pleasure of the pain it was causing him.

"Sal?" He heard a voice say from his right. "It's time, Sal." His wife Charlotte said. "It's ok. You can let go now." She reached over and placed her hand on his in a consolatory gesture. Once again, when their flesh met, his mind was flooded with images of Charlotte and those men and he understood why she wanted him to let go. What a ridiculous fool he had been. Sal had loved that woman with all his heart, but she hadn't loved him for some time. Charlotte had been much younger than Sal when they had married. Then his cancer caused him to become a burden to her. She had found comfort in the beds of other men. And now she was ready for him to die and get it over with so she could get on with her new life. The horrible and degrading sex scenes were the final images Sal had in his mind as a living human being when his body gave out its last gasp allowing his spirit to move on. But where would it move on to? His family was gone and all that remained was that hideous specter of Meghan.

Sal stood across the room a moment later, looking back at his deathbed. Charlotte stood by his bedside, pretending to be in mourning while taking furtive glances down at her watch as if determining how long she might have to stand next to his body, playing the dutiful wife, before she could call for help and eventually leave. When the nurses monitoring Sal's machinery from their central station came into the room, Charlotte quickly turned on the waterworks, crying as if she had just lost the love of her life.

Sal felt an icy chill settle upon his shoulder as he slowly turned and looked into the mutilated face of his one-time lover Meghan. She opened her mouth sensuously and a disgusting odor of rotting meat came leaching out like the stench of garbage fermenting in a can for weeks. Sal saw her gray slime-covered tongue flitting about the cavernous orifice and noticed several worm-like creatures squirming in and out of the open weeping soars on her glistening face. The hideous thing which had once been his beautiful lover reached up and entwined her bony fingers into the hair on the back of his head, drawing him closer. He tried with all his might to resist her pull, but her strength was much greater than his and she pulled his lips down to meet hers.

He could smell the foul reek of her as he struggled hopelessly to keep his lips away from hers. But no matter how much he fought, his mouth soon became pressed tightly against the crumbling maggot-infested flesh of her gaping maw. His stomach revolted as he felt her cold, slimy tongue sliding across his lips and diving deep into his mouth, where it flitted from side to side as if it had a mind of its own.

Next, Meghan grabbed his hand and forced it onto one of her withered breasts as she slowly pulled her snake-like tongue out of his mouth. Sal spat several foul-tasting crawling things behind her as Meghan laid her right cheek against his. Sal could clearly see what remained of her demolished brain from his position, which appeared to be undulating impossibly as dozens of white maggot-like worms skated across its slimy-covered surface in a hideous ballet of revulsion. Some of the larvae would occasionally stop to bore deep into the spongy meat and creep below the outer surface of the decaying brain tissue.

The Meghan specter whispered something into Sal's ear: "I came back for you as I promised so many years ago, my love, and now we will finally be joined together in our special lover's embrace in Hell for eternity." Sal heard a loud maniacal ear-splitting scream reverberating throughout the room and realized, with horror; it was coming from him.

Running Away and Into (Rickey Rivers Jr.)

I went to the track outside my old high school building. They kept the gate open for community children and the elderly. There usually weren't many children around, and no, I'm not elderly. I'm 38. At times I felt older, especially as I got older.

Stress had affected my sleep and mood. Work was hard enough and I promised my wife good news, but that wasn't the case. I promised so much, but good news was miles away. To better handle stress my doctor suggested exercise. Today I ran.

The outdoor school track was ¼ mile and it surrounded a circle of grass that the neighborhood children would play on. Today the track was vacant. I thought that was odd, at least for a Saturday, but maybe children have better things to do. There's so many distractions. Secretly I wanted a nice older couple to be somewhere close. I felt more comfortable with older people around, even if I'd just pass them with a hand raised. It's nice to see people, to be close, not to have a conversation, just to have them around.

It had been awhile since I ran, so I was awkward on the track. I knew I looked like a man who'd lost control of his limbs. Still, I ran on, with a certain confidence that rang from inside like a bell in a clock tower. I was huffing, I was puffing, I had to catch my breath. Thoughts ran to me quick so I picked up my feet and ran at a steady pace. Soon I gained speed.

I ran, picked up more speed and pumped my arms. My feet slapped the concrete like drumsticks on a stiff drum. It reminded me of church. I had stopped going, after a certain time I got on to being an adult and left things behind.

I gained rhythm in my run. I rode that rhythm all around the track, like a living needle on a concrete road. I ran so fast that I ran past myself. I ran so fast that I ran past myself running past myself. I ran so fast that I left my whole mind behind, and then left parts of myself behind myself. I saw myself in front of me and ran passed him too. To my left I saw myself running behind myself, this me ran behind me too.

The stress was elsewhere. It didn't matter. It had cleared out of my mind, because my mind had cleared out of my body. I ran so fast that none of it mattered anymore. Nothing was true but the moment, the run, all of me ran and ran some more.

The sun beat me, the heat, mixed with the run gave me a glorious sweat. The sweat washed away worries. So much so that there was nothing left. Yet still I ran, and kept running, all of us did. We were light. We were free, no cares to us, many feet on a record track and we followed the beautiful rhythm of each other. My feet were so numb and they felt like bricks.

Independent of this run, in the middle of the track, on the grass circle, I saw something small and human, a boy sitting still, his head was down. I ran around him, past and through myself. All of us running in one direction, from the outside looking in we'd resemble a flip book. I remember drawing tiny pictures back in the day, flipping the page, and seeing the poorly drawn cartoons actually move. It was amazing to see something of my design have life, and it was only a blur.

The boy raised his head, as if noticing me and followed my trek with his eyes. The boy's head spun watching me. Of course, this wasn't true, but it looked to be that way from my position. Many eyes were on him, one set on me, on all of us, blurry.

Something soon spoke to me, from the inside, then out.

"Hello!" I called, all of us did, the voices rang out, surrounding the boy.

He raised a weak hand to acknowledge me, smiling. The smile seemed to take effort, it was unnatural, like it needed to pull itself out from deep down. A smile shouldn't be so hard to reveal. Then I saw tears.

"Are you okay?" I called, all of us did.

The boy nodded, like something broken.

"Why are you crying?" I said, first wondering, indirectly catching up with myself.

The boy shook his head.

"It's okay," I told him. "I'm not a bad guy."

He was quiet. I slowed down even more. Soon I stopped all together and approached the boy. The boy kept his eyes on me. He reminded me of a stray cat that was unsure if they'd wanted to trust a person or not. In a way, I was scared too.

"It's alright," I said. "Where's your family?"

He shook his head.

That was no good. "It'll get dark soon. Do you have a place to go?"

He shook his head again.

It annoyed me.

"You mute?"

"No," he said.

I laughed. I guess he was still unsure, which did make sense. An adult can often scare a child, especially if that child's upbringing wasn't the best. I told the boy I hope he had someplace to go.

"I do," he said.

"Good, but why are you crying?"

The boy shook his head again.

Then I shook mine. "Fine, you don't have to tell me." And it was true, he didn't. What did I care anyway? Why should I care about a child sitting in the middle of an outdoor track? Who was he to me, no one, just a little boy on his own. Why should I care? No, that's not right, and it's not fair.

Finally the kid said "I'm scared to walk home."

"Scared?" I repeated this emotion. For some reason I just said the word and immediately said the next thing. "I'm done running, I can drive you back."

The boy's face lit up. "You'd do that?" It was like someone had popped a balloon inside of him, his face was wide and full.

"Sure," I said. Really, it meant nothing.

I walked toward the parking lot with the boy following. First we needed to cross the track to get to the other side, the place near the gate with the benches. This is when I noticed it. A part of me was still running. He, meaning I, was like a blur and he flew past us like a train.

"You're not finished," said the boy.

Apparently I wasn't.

A blur flew past, then another, and another.

But we had to cross over, we just had to.

"I'm scared," said the boy.

"It's alright," I told him, keeping my feelings inside. Honestly, I didn't know what else to do beyond what I ended up doing. I grabbed the boy's hand, and both of us walked onto the track. A gust of wind shook me, but I kept walking, both of us did.

I looked down after we crossed over. The boy was smiling. I felt my breath catch up with me, then I felt the run, how it wore me down. My legs ached. My arms ached. The many men of me had taken a toll, all of us joining together at once, like all of us had broken apart.

"Hey, mister," said the boy. "Why were you running so hard?"

I looked behind us. The track was empty and quiet, peaceful and still. I didn't know what to say. It wasn't important.

"You never said why you were crying," I said to the boy.

"Yeah, I know," he said, like it just didn't matter.

I laughed at this, a joyful laugh, then so did the boy. We laughed all the way back to my car. I opened the driver's side door and sat down, unlocking the passenger's side. I took a deep breath and let it all out. Life wasn't bad after all.

The boy took his seat and looked at me. "Everything's fine."

"Yeah," I said. "I think so too."

"One day at a time," he said.

One day at a time, dad said that. He always did.

I told the kid that and the kid just smiled.

He gave me directions for home and I dropped him off. His home wasn't far from the school. It was a dingy looking home and the windows were dirty. The roof seemed to barely hang on. It reminded me of

something you'd put together as a child, either with blocks or couch cushions, rundown is the word. It wasn't really suitable for a healthy household, but who was I to judge? I also came from humble beginnings. My childhood home wasn't much to brag about, but dad did his best. That's all we can do.

"Thanks," the boy said, halfway in and out.

"No prob, Bob." That's all I said.

The boy smiled at me, a knowing smile, a smile that said *That's not my name.*

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I never actually got the boy's name. I guess it doesn't matter. Still, sometimes I wonder if I should have just asked. That's what responsible adults do, but sometimes I'm not a responsible adult. Sometimes I drink. Sometimes I lie. Sometimes I yell at other cars on the road. But that's okay, none of us are perfect. All of us are trying everyday. Some of us try too hard and work ourselves into an early grave.

These last few months I've tried hard for a raise. I sucked up to the boss, and I've hated myself. Going forward I hope to change. I hope to excel at work, but keep a cool head as well, and not let the stress control me.

My wife's pregnant and I've been running myself ragged trying to earn enough, to have enough, to be enough. I do think I'm enough. I just have to have control, a balance, a perfect little tempo. Then I'll understand this world, the great band of life and how to march.

After meeting the boy on the grass circle of the outdoor track, I truly feel one step closer to who I'm meant to be, the person my parents raised, the person Tonya married and the person I wish to be for myself. The future is as bright as the summer sun and it has rhythm as well.

I realize now I never told the boy my name either. That's me again, not being responsible. But honestly, that's okay. I think sometimes it's okay to help another person and never get details about them. None of us deserve that, we're just people after all, passing each other. We can help without details.

The boy, the man, both of us eventually got where we needed to be. Both of us were home and I think I further understand why I met that little boy on that particular day. Beyond coincidence, it was fate. I caught up to myself, in more ways than one.

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From time to time I drive past the old school. I've searched for the house where I dropped off the boy. I know where it was, where it should be. But I guess demolition crews work fast. They work so fast that they're able to tear down a house and not leave anything left behind. One day I'll go back to that spot, get out of the car and wait. I want to see if I can feel anything, some small semblance of the boy, some anything to remind me.

Over time my memory of this day has waned. I know how it was, I remember the house and I remember the boy, but sometimes it's like my mind doesn't want to fill in details. I guess it's helping me in a way. The boy's face was a haze, but I remember his trembling hand clutching mine, both of us crossing the track, both of us feeling the gust of wind like a train, shaking us, the car ride home, the tears. He said he was scared. I know about being scared. Every adult does, that's why we share stories, to comfort us, to remind us.

I still run. Only now it's around the neighborhood. It's chaotic though, to run in the street, but I like it that way. People at work have noticed the change in me. Tonya has too.

I'm not different. I'm still me. I've just given up on fear. Fear is temporary. Sometimes you have to take that leap, whether you're ready or not. Sometimes it's okay to be scared, admit you're scared, and still take a leap. That leap to someplace else, that trip to an old high school, that trip to a broken down home with a cry inside, all of these are worthwhile to help another. That's why we're here, to help. Why wouldn't I help a crying child? Those eyes looking up to me with hope, as if I could him give anything more than myself. Who did I think I was? In reality I was only a man who understood what it was like to be afraid.

I'm older now, older than I was, older than my father could be. But that's alright. I'll follow his lead. I'll be what he was to me.

Fashion Victims (Liam A. Spinage)

Louis, a mere spindle of a young man with no more than a day's growth on his chin after a week, has three problems. The first problem coalesces into two distinct forms: his flat mates Viktor and Christophe. It is his misfortune to share lodgings with them while they are all students at the Institute of Experimental Fashion and Textile Design in Paris. The second problem is that he is weeks behind on his graduation project: his ideas are apparently 'pedestrian' and 'derivative'. In his desire for perfection, he has discarded many not-so-innovative-ideas to the cutting room floor. The third problem, by far the most pressing in his mind, is the location of his precious fabric scissors.

Louis is close to what you might call obsessive-compulsive - though not for certain, not without a proper clinical diagnosis. Let us say merely that he has a strong preference for order rather than chaos. A place for everything and everything in its place is Louis's motto. This is not something that can be said for those who he resides with. Chaos reigns among these two of his fellows, whose lackadaisical attitude to tidiness and cleanliness frequently leaves Louis teetering on the brink of despondency.

Until, one day, he falls from that brink, headlong into chaos itself.

"Where the fuck are my fabric scissors?" Louis stomps into the kitchen from their lounge, startling Viktor who is fully engaged in rolling a joint for breakfast. "If I've told you once, I've told you a thousand times, don't use them for anything other than fabric." Viktor has the temerity to not even look guilty: what he looks is stoned with a touch of hungover because that's how he always looks. Viktor looks like an artist's impression of a hipster yeti. He works mainly with barbed wire and modeling clay. He hasn't even bothered to dress this morning so his sweaty, hairy bulk combines with the reek of marijuana and stale beer to make Louis twitch. Louis believes kitchens should smell like kitchens, not brothels.

"Not me, bro. Think I saw Christophe with them last night? He was doing something complicated with plastic sheeting for some project." Viktor doesn't even look up when Christophe walks in, tanned and toned with nothing on but his tatty dressing gown and a smile.

"Nope. Haven't seen them. Jesus, you need to relax a bit, Louis. Stop snipping at us all the time." Christophe removes the newly rolled joint from Viktor's stained fingers and takes a long puff, then offers it to Louis on the off chance this is the one time Louis takes them up on it.

He doesn't.

"For fucks sake, I swear I'm gonna bloody murder the both of you one of these days! Look at the state of this place! If those scissors aren't back on my desk by the end of today, there will be hell to pay!" He storms out, leaving the other two in a haze of blue smoke and the aroma of strong coffee. His flat mates sigh, shrug, and get on with their day. They're usually pretty laid-back, except when it comes to paying their rent, because their bugbear with Louis is that in a desire to impress, he spends all his money on boutique fabrics and rarely stumps up his share. Still, live and let live.

Louis walks through Montmartre, tries to calm down. He can't think clearly when he's in this state and it's thinking he needs to do. He must come up with that one single idea that will transform the fashion industry and catapult him to fame. He simply must: there is no alternative.

He hasn't really been paying attention to where he's walking, though - he soon finds himself on a little cobbled street somewhere past the Square Louise Michel, a place he doesn't recognize. Ivy grows up the wall that lines one side of this road, scooters putt past with a flurry of horns; a group of young people sit chatting outside a local patisserie, sipping their coffees in the chill of the spring morning. It's picture-postcard perfect Montmartre and he wonders why he's never stopped here before. Then he spots something else: a pavement A-frame spinning in the breeze which reads FABRIC EMPORIUM NOW OPEN. A red arrow points to an entrance down a shady alley where he can see a beaded curtain covering an open doorway. Curious, he moves towards it. He thought he knew all the fabric fairs in this part of the city. Could this be something new? Could it be *the* thing he's been looking for? Is his quest over, his salvation close at hand? Barely able to contain his excitement, he pushes aside the curtain, which elicits the tinkling of a small bell as he crosses the threshold into this realm of promise and reward.

It's strangely warm inside, especially compared to the spring air. Swathes of many-hued fabric hang everywhere, not laid out in bolts on the table as in other shops but draped vertically over screens, from ceiling beams, overlapping each other, and pierced through with obscure images like some Dadaist nightmare. There's nobody here, so Louis spends a while browsing. The cloying smell of jasmine permeates the air, rising from unseen censers to dance in swirling motes of light which accentuates some of the more bizarre fabrics on display: a long, thin red and yellow ribbon flapping in the breeze, a deep reddish-brown cloth rolled into a ball and hung from a lamp. If he wasn't so curious, so desperate, he'd leave at this point because the displays are getting more bizarre as he pushes aside some of the drapes and reveals little rooms devoted to particular colors and designs. At one point he pushes aside a bolt of brilliant blue to reveal a doorway on which is pinned a single piece of fabric painted with a crude depiction of an eye.

He's committed now, so he reaches forward and opens the door. Nothing but darkness. Nevertheless, he's in too deep, lost in a maze of fabric with no choice but to go ahead. He steps in and two lights flicker into life overhead as he moves forward into the back room.

"Can we help you, young man?"

"Yes, can we help you? I'm sure we can. It's not often people find their way here. You must be very special. Yes, very special indeed."

Two men emerge, one from beneath each of the bulbs overhead, which have been carefully shaded so as to make the effect kaleidoscopic and more than a bit trippy. Louis blinks. Their features are so alike they must be brothers, maybe twins: balding, bespectacled, little round eyes, delicate twirling mustaches decorate their upper lips. They wear identical suits of a deep crimson velvet. They both look on, clearly waiting for his response.

"Oh, I…I'm looking for something rather special." Louis feels a little unnerved by their presence. He'd rather leave and carry on browsing on his own.

"Oh, we do have something special, don't we?" The man on the right looks over at the other with a wry smell.

"Oh, yes. I think we can accommodate the young gentleman. What is it you desire?"

Louis runs his fingers through his hair. "I need something people will pay attention to. Something nobody has ever seen. Something to make me famous. To shock and awe the fashion world. It's just that…"

The man on the right interrupts him. "Oh, you have definitely come to the right place, young man! Do we have a treat for you!"

"Yes, indeed!" The other nods vigorously and reaches under the counter of a little desk Louis has only just noticed in the strange semi-darkness and ever-swirling colors of this strange and disturbing little room.

What he retrieves is a bolt of fabric so sheer that Louis struggles at first to see what it is beyond the gleam upon it from the lanterns. "Here, see what you think of this. Come forward, feel the cut of the cloth, don't be afraid!"

Louis reaches forward eagerly. His hand brushes the cloth. It feels a little rough to the touch and he can see close up that it resembles stretched and tanned leather, though it's practically see-through. He turns it over in his hand, caressing it gently between his fingers. It feels somewhat damp but cooling on one side, crinkled and dry on the other. It's like nothing he's ever handled before. He's sold. It's altogether the most remarkable bolt of cloth that he has ever seen.

"How much?" Louis can pay, whatever it is, the rent will just have to wait, or maybe Christophe can stump up his share this month.

"Well, we only have this one bolt…"

Louis' heart sinks. There's barely enough there for a single outfit. He'll have to be pretty creative.

"Tell you what. Just because you're a *special* customer."

"Very special!"

"Yes, very special!" They begin nodding at each other again. "We'll let you have this one bolt for a knock-down price. What's more, we'll show you how to make this cloth. All we ask is that you tell people where you got it from. Understood?"

Louis can't believe it. His dream is turning over in his mind now - so close to fruition he can already see his face on the cover of magazines. "Deal."

"Excellent! Now, follow these instructions to the letter: there will be hell to pay if you get them wrong. What you'll need to make this yourself is a pair of exceptional fabric scissors…"

When Louis finally gets home, it's late and both of his flat mates seem to have retired to their rooms. He turns on the light in the lounge and instantly his shoulders slump. There's a mass of washing up to be done, which should by all rights at least be stacked in the kitchen, not the lounge, if not actually taken care of properly. There are also little smears of modeling clay with Viktor's fingerprints in them on the doorknob and on the wall by the light switch.

His precious scissors are there on the table. He sighs in momentary relief but as he gets closer, he can see that someone has encased them in a block of modeling clay like some mock-Arthurian sword in the stone. Then he spots red paint on them. His face voids of that relief and turns instead to a shade of stark scarlet.

Louis finally cracks. Drawing the scissors from the clay, he turns them over and over in his shaking hands as they glisten under the dim light of the single bare bulb. He admires their sharpness, their desire to be used to make the most exquisite garments. Gripping them tightly, Louis wields them as an implement of rage. He wasn't joking when he said he'd bloody murder them.

He decides to take care of Christophe first. As he suspected, Christophe is so out of it he doesn't see or hear him coming. Louis doesn't hesitate. He lifts the scissors over his head and brings them down with all his strength on Christophe's prone, naked form. It's surprising how easy and quick it is. The scissors sever a major artery and blood spurts forth from one, single, fatal, wound in Christophe's neck. There's a gurgling noise mixed in with Louis' own heavy panting. His head is filled with that noise, his clothes are covered with blood. It doesn't take him long to dispatch Viktor either: it's all surprisingly easy. There's plenty of plastic sheeting in Christophe's room which helps keep the scene clean.

Now Louis only has two problems. He picks up his scissors and begins cutting, slowly and steadily at first but then faster, faster, frenzied, unrepentant. Blood and sweat, blood and sweat. He keeps repeating the phrase over and over, the phrase he learned from the tailors as he prepares a dye bath to dip the strips of skin in. That's the first problem solved. The second problem is this: what will people think?

Louis's entry into the fashion show draws shock but wide acclaim. How daring! How visionary! "Skin on Skin" is an instant hit. They don't need to know how accurate a term that is for his new creation. Some of them, though, are literally dying to find out. He conveniently forgets he was supposed to send people to the fabric emporium. The two strange old men aren't exactly in a position to do anything about it anyway, or so he reckons. He doesn't think they've left that shop in many, many, years. Besides, he's busy, so busy. Instantly catapulted to fame, he's in demand everywhere all the time. At night though, he sews new clothes from those who have come too close to discovering his secret. He sleeps fitfully, frantic, exhausted, but with no attendant guilt or shame. That's just not who he is any more.

It comes as a surprise to Louis when he sees the two tailors in the front row beside the catwalk. They stand out from the rest of the press because they're still dressed in red velvet and rather than applauding with the rest of the crowd, their heads are slightly bowed and shaking violently in disapproval. Then one of them raises his voice and cries out. "It's flesh! It's just flesh and blood!"

The crowd goes quiet. Even the cameras stop flashing. They all stand there, murmuring and pointing. Louis is horrified. His secret is out! What will they do? What should he do? The eyes of the crowd turn to the two tailors, then back to Louis, then back at the tailors. Disbelief is suspended in the air, thick and cloying, choking him. He has one moment to react and wastes it looking for an escape route. Then the crowd is upon him. Not because he's a disgusting loathsome killer, but because he wouldn't reveal his secrets. He stumbles and falls on the catwalk. His scissors fall out of his pocket and clutter to the ground beside him.

Now Louis only has one problem, which is that everyone wants a piece of him. He struggles and writhes under the mass of bodies each towering down on him, raining blows down on him as he raises his hands feebly to cover his face and cries out in desperation to the two tailors, begging their forgiveness. The last thing he sees is a pair of scissors, gleaming with inner light, descending at breakneck speed toward his neck. Then Louis has no problems at all, and everyone walks away with a Louis original.

The Ghost of Frank White (Stephen Lang)

Tilly gave all the rooms a thorough spray with the air freshener. She worked from top to bottom, applying *spring lavender* to every corner and crevice. It took her twenty minutes, leaving half an hour before the start of the visitor tour of Frank White's house.

Doug was waiting for Tilly in reception, nervously twisting the ID at the end of his lanyard. He checked his watch. Doug always arrived first, no matter how early she finished with the air freshener. Frank had asked for punctuality, but not so you'd strive to outperform your colleagues.

Tilly had been working there for months and it felt like Head Office didn't trust her. She certainly didn't need a minder, if that was what Doug was supposed to be. The visitors were harmless. Half the time, she couldn't get a word out of them.

Sandra, the third member of the team, arrived before Tilly had a chance to acknowledge Doug. Sandra pulled the chair from behind what she proudly called "the desk". Frank White's House wasn't large enough for the National Trust to grant it a shop, so the desk displayed souvenir tour guides and postcards.

"Have we got ten people today?"

Sandra passed the queue of visitors waiting outside every morning, Tilly remained baffled why she never knew the answer.

"Looks like we have our grand total," said Doug. "It's almost ten o'clock."

Frank White had stipulated the rule *groups of ten at ten o'clock* when he donated the property through his will. Tickets were available online on a 'first come, first served' basis to guarantee entry. The house was a popular attraction. Tilly had decided the selling point was its charm. It was home to a few unusual antiques, beautiful gardens visible from the windows of every room and a quaint ghost story.

Doug unhooked the rope separating reception from the outside world and the visitors entered. Sandra picked up her scanner and gave it a hesitant wave in the air, ready to point it at the e-tickets on everyone's phones. She moved with heavy steps like a trainee astronaut newly granted a licence for a deadly raygun. One couple – retired at Tilly's guess - had printed their tickets, the crisp white sheets of A4 prompting a sigh of relief from Sandra.

The church bells had already chimed ten, but they were near enough on time.

"Here goes, then," said Doug. "If you'd all like to follow me."

Tilly gave the standard health and safety preamble as they gathered at the foot of the stairs. She explained that many of the exhibits in the house were fragile and easy to knock over at the gentlest of movements, so rucksacks had to be worn on the front of the body. No food or drink was allowed. Photography was permitted, but no videos.

The routine had become automatic, it allowed Tilly time to study everyone. The retired couple stood nearest to her, lapping up her every word. A tall man and ashen-faced woman stood beside Doug and four student girls shifted around to find the best positions. A young couple at the back of the group silently repositioned their rucksacks.

Tilly took the wad of cards from her pocket and checked her notes were in the correct sequence. There was a mine of information to get through in an hour. The tour started at the top of the stairs and explored the upstairs rooms first.

"Follow me," she said, "and please observe the beautiful artwork on your way up."

The life-sized painting of Frank White filled the top of the stairway. It depicted Frank standing in the library, cigar in hand. The library was on the other side of the wall, it was almost like a window into it. Nothing much had changed since Frank had posed for the artist a century past. The rows of books lining the walnut shelves and the writing bureau with antique vases at every corner were the same. The only thing missing from the room was Frank White himself.

"This is our great benefactor," said Tilly. "Mr Frank White. Keep your eye on his right foot as you continue to the master bedroom."

Visitors - obliging Tilly's request to watch the foot - had been known to trip as they passed. Tilly always stood at the top of the stairs to prevent any accidents. The group reassembled at the door of the master bedroom.

"So," said Tilly. "Did you notice anything unusual?"

The ashen-faced woman raised her hand.

"Does the foot follow you across the landing? I'm sure I saw it move. Shift slightly. You know, like it was watching me."

Tilly clapped her hands together. It was so satisfying when they played along, although the foot story was nonsense. She'd often studied the painting as she did her rounds with the air freshener. She'd danced backwards and forwards as she sprayed and the foot never moved at all. But her job told her to say otherwise.

"Yes," she said. "The foot tends to move as if it's following you."

Doug liked to take over when they reached the master bedroom. Tilly suspected he thought the ornate four-poster bed too sensitive a subject for a female guide to talk about. Doug cleared his throat and turned to the tall man and the ashen-faced woman.

"Can I ask," he said, "are you a couple?"

The tall man took a long step to the side.

"No!"

Tilly smiled. Doug often made the same mistake. Men and women together did not always signify that they were a couple. Tilly liked to watch for the signs of first dates. Tours like this were ideal because people didn't have to talk much, only spend an hour studying each other's body language while listening to the stories about the house.

The young man and woman with the rucksacks stepped forward.

"We're a couple."

His accent sounded American. Tilly and Doug often made fools of themselves in front of American tourists. The Americans were always so sharp.

"What side of the bed do you sleep on?" said Doug.

"Whatever side she tells me to," said the young man.

"Ha ha, good answer!"

Doug scratched the back of his neck. He did this when he felt threatened. In Doug's world, only Doug made the jokes.

The young man bowed his head.

"I sleep on the left side," he said.

"Well," said Doug. "Frank had strict rules. The *woman* slept on the left side of the bed and the *man* slept on the right. That way the man could keep his right arm – his sword arm – free to fight off intruders."

Doug brandished an invisible sword and pointed it at the tall man. Tilly knew Frank White had never married. He was too fastidious for anyone to put up with him. Frank must have had the bed to himself.

"You are all," she said, "free to sleep on whichever side you prefer."

The four student girls laughed. Doug scratched the back of his neck.

"Please follow me through to the library," said Tilly.

Frank White. So many rules and so many stipulations. He revelled in his most self-indulgent behaviour in the library.

The fireplace had obsessed him. He'd ordered his servants to wrap each lump of coal in newspaper. He etched chalk marks on the floor to indicate the exact positioning of the furniture around the hearth. Frank liked his writing bureau placed at a right angle. His prized antique vases were arranged with precision.

"Frank White threatened to haunt the house forever if his instructions weren't followed to the letter," said Doug.

Tilly didn't believe in ghosts. She often nudged the furniture as she passed it in defiance of Frank White's absurd wishes. The writing bureau was an unnecessary obstruction and the vases were irritating dust traps.

“And it’s said that sometimes you can smell Frank’s cigar smoke.” Doug inhaled a theatrical sniff. “In this very room.”

***

Doug had taken over more than usual on today’s tour. He’d spent a long time on the silly stories about the bed and the cigar smoke. At this rate, he’d soon be edging in on the foot. Tilly couldn’t stop thinking about him. She pictured him plotting his next move as he drove home. What he could take from her and what points he could score.

She needed something to get rid of him. Something to pin on Doug to help bring him down. It would be like sticking pins in an effigy.

Tilly poured herself a nightcap and curled up with her book. She liked to lie in the exact centre of the bed. After half an hour, she realised she’d read the same paragraph three times. Her thoughts kept returning to Doug - laughing, leering, getting in her way. She turned the light out.

During the night, Tilly dreamt she was moving. She felt the right side of the bed tip up, only slightly, but enough to cause her to roll over a little further to the left.

***

Tilly treated the library to a good dose of the air freshener in the morning. She moved the writing bureau a few inches to the right. She didn’t believe in ghosts.

Ten people had tickets for the tour. Doug unhooked the rope,and Sandra’s hand trembled as she picked up the raygun.

“Has anyone printed their tickets?”

One visitor had, although the quality was so poor, the scanner failed to work. Sandra spent ages at the desk tapping the keyboard as she checked the reservation on what she called “the system”. The church bells had long chimed ten o’clock by the time she’d finished.

“Here goes, then,” said Doug. “If you’d all like to follow me.”

Tilly realised her notes were out of order. She fumbled with the cards as Doug started the health and safety preamble. She took no notice of the visitors as she tried to shut out the drone of his voice. There were definite and uncertain couples in the group, who may have gone on to disrupt the bed story, but Tilly didn’t take them in. Doug had his hands in his pockets, noisily jingling coins and keys in satisfaction. He’d snatched health and safety from her and scored a point.

She wouldn’t let him steal the foot story, there was no chance of that, but Tilly said *boot* instead of *foot* when they passed the painting of Frank White, which confused the group. She caught herself daydreaming when Doug took over in the bedroom. She was thinking of pins. They soon reached the library.

“You’ll see acorns placed on some of the chairs,” said Doug. “It means *don’t sit here*. The chairs are very old. Most of our visitors do as we ask but on one of our tours last year,” he gently tapped a chair, “A little girl jumped up here. Her parents were very apologetic. It was the lady in the white dress, said the little girl. The lady in white told me to do it. The little girl pointed in the corner as if to excuse herself. She pointed over there - into thin air.”

The group all turned to look. Of course, there was nothing to see. It was thin air. Tilly heard something shatter.

“Whoops.”

***

Doug had not told the group to wear their rucksacks on the front of the body in the health and safety preamble. Although a visitor has broken the vase, the mishap was technically Doug’s fault. Tilly told Doug that Frank would not be pleased.

He rubbed the back of his neck. Head Office wouldn't miss just one vase, would they? Tilly told him she'd close up for the day. He should go home and think about what he'd done.

There was only one way to describe Doug. His actions summed it up. *A pain in the neck.*

Tilly poured herself a nightcap and curled up with her book. *A pain in the neck*. She'd found her pin.

During the night, Tilly felt a shove from behind. A firm push between her shoulder blades edged her further over to the left side of the bed.

***

The *spring lavender* spat out a dribble that landed on the lapel of Tilly's jacket. She shook the can and tried again. The air freshener had run out. She'd forgotten to stock up.

Sandra sat behind the desk, watching the raygun as it charged.

"Where's Doug?" said Tilly. "It's not like him to be late."

"He's not coming in today. He had a little collision in his car this morning. Whiplash."

"Oh. Any other injuries?"

Sandra tapped a few keys on her keyboard as if "the system" might help with the answer.

"Er, I don't know. Doug hurt his neck. He sounded like he was in pain."

"I see."

The nine people waiting for the tour counted as eight, as children under five went free. The child looked so full of energy as she ran up and down and her mother had to keep pulling her out of the flowerbeds. How would they manage an hour? Why on earth were they even here? It wasn't Tilly's job to entertain small children.

"Maybe I should call Head Office?" said Sandra.

Tilly laughed.

"I'm sure that having less than ten people on the tour won't invoke the wrath of the spirit world. Would you agree?"

"I mean, should I tell them about Doug? So they can send over a replacement?"

Tilly unhooked the rope.

"There's no time for that. Can you scan the tickets? Don't waste time asking for printouts. We're living in a digital age, you know."

Tilly waited until Sandra had finished with the raygun.

"Here goes," she said. "If you'd all like to follow me."

Tilly felt a fresh burst of energy rushing through her. It was like having an instant spa treatment. She loved conducting the tour on her own with no interruptions. But Tilly soon felt a presence behind her, a shadow. It wasn't until the group started looking past Tilly's shoulder that she turned round.

"What are you doing here?"

"I thought you might need a hand," said Sandra.

They spoke in theatrical stage whispers. A voice soon interrupted them.

"Excuse me? Is this old house haunted?"

The woman had an American accent. It was the mother of the unruly child.

"Well," said Sandra. "I'll let you into a little secret."

Sandra pushed her way in before Tilly could stop her. She recounted the story of the lady in white.

The little girl rubbed her hands together. Tilly wondered if it was a prelude to bursting into tears.

"Mummy," she said, "I'm scared."

***

Tilly waited for the voicemail to kick in.

"Hi, Doug. Sorry you're unable to pick up. Listen, I've spoken to Head Office. They'd like you to stay at home while they look into things. Call it a wellbeing issue. I'll be in touch."

She sensed the shadow behind her again. She turned to see Sandra framed in the doorway of the master bedroom.

"Who were you talking to, Tilly? Was it Doug? How is he?"

Tilly smiled. One down, one to go. There was only one way to describe Sandra. *A waste of space.* Tilly had found her pin.

"Do you think you're up to it, Sandra? Have you got what it takes?"

"What do you mean?"

"You know what I mean. Taking over the tour. It's a big step up from the desk, you know. Taking over *my* tour. Do you enjoy frightening small children? Frank would *not* be pleased about that."

"Frank?"

"Come over here and look at the painting. Frank White, our great benefactor. What would he say?"

Sandra squinted as she leaned forward at the top of the stairs.

"Look at Frank's right foot, Sandra. Can you see anything unusual about it? No? Come, move a little closer. There – look! Watch out! Mind that space!"

***

At least the ambulance had arrived promptly. Sandra wasn't badly hurt, just incapacitated and broken legs tended to put people out of action for a long time. Tilly had tried to save her. Nobody could argue with that.

Tilly decided not to pour herself a nightcap. She had to keep a clear head for the morning. Tomorrow was a big day. Just her with the rope and the raygun. The health and safety preamble. The cards. The painting of Frank White and his foot. The master bedroom. The library. Just her. And Frank.

Tilly fell asleep before she could open her book. She woke up on the left side of the bed in the morning, feeling the weight of an arm draped across her. The arm tightened as it hugged her for a few seconds before letting go – as if to remind her of the importance of the day ahead. It was like a pinch of good luck.

***

Whenever Tilly thought of Frank, she felt a soft breath on her neck and took in the smell of cigars wafting around her. She wished he wouldn't smoke so much, but it wasn't too bad once you got used to it.

She lit a fire in the hearth in the library, put the vases away and shifted the writing bureau further to the right. She removed the acorns from the chairs. She and Frank would soon come to an understanding. It was how partnerships worked.

And whilst she kept herself busy, the foot *did* follow her across the landing. More than that, Tilly noticed a smirk on Frank White's face whenever she passed.

Tilly thought of a better story to tell the visitors about the lady in white - how Frank's first love had jilted him at the altar. A young woman in her wedding dress changed her mind at the last minute and ran away from the church as the bells chimed ten. After Tilly had told the story a few times, she started to see him. Frank would stand at the back of the group, miming the actions of a violin to the sad story. She'd work that into the tour – how Frank White had a delicious sense of humour. He really did.

Cold Season (Damir Salkovic)

Above the pines, the sky was contracting, drawing inward as if from the cold. Andy was aware of his numb body moving, his feet treading the wet snow, but the house at the end of the driveway seemed to get no closer. Slivers of ice crawled through the tops of his socks and soaked his feet. It was snowing hard and the wind had picked up, chilling him to the bone.

There were several cars parked in the driveway and on the front lawn, half-buried in the snow. Lights shone in the windows and he could hear muted noises from the house, laughter and music and the jabber of voices.

Under different circumstances, Andy would have found it absurd: a party in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by miles of woods, half an hour's drive from the nearest town in the best of conditions. But right now none of that mattered. Right now all he could think about was getting in out of the cold and finding a phone. Calling for a tow truck – provided that the garage in Redbridge had one and the driver would be willing to get on the road in this weather. Briefly he considered calling Kayla and letting her know he'd be late, but discarded the idea. She would ask him if he'd been drinking, make him feel like the car accident had somehow been his fault.

The pines crouched in the snow, throwing long blue shadows across the whiteness. For an instant, he thought he saw something stir amid the black boles, but when he focused his attention it was gone. His teeth were chattering from the cold. It was ridiculous: no one could be standing just beyond sight in the treeline, watching him.

He raised his hand and rapped on the door.

Snow swirled around him, thicker than before, blurring out the woods, covering the tracks he'd left behind. No way for him to find his way back to the road and the car now. Aware only of the emptiness and cold, he had not paid attention to landmarks on his way up. Maybe there weren't any, or maybe the white glare of snow had erased them from the silent landscape.

The noise inside had abated somewhat, the music coming clearer, a jazz record playing on an old-fashioned turntable. He heard a bolt snap back and the lock turn and the door opened. On the other side of it was an older man, tall and broad-chested, dressed in a tan sport coat and slacks. If he felt surprise at the sight of the visitor, he showed no sign of it. The rush of warmth from inside the house almost made Andy cry with relief.

"Sorry to bother you," he said, aware of what he must look like. "My car went into a ditch down by the road. I was wondering if you have a phone I can use." He held up his cell phone and tried on a smile. "No signal," he said and felt stupid for saying it.

Something passed across the man's face, a shadow so fleeting that Andy couldn't be sure he'd noticed it: wariness, or recognition.

"No bother at all," he said, moving aside to let Andy enter. "Where did you go off the road?"

"Couldn't tell," Andy said, stamping his feet to warm them up. He tried to remember the details of the accident, but the exertion and the cold had erased them, leaving behind a string of fragmented images: a vast white shape rushing across the road, a frantic wrench of the wheel, the forest spinning drunkenly in the windshield. He'd hit a snow drift on the ice, or gotten caught in an avalanche. That sounded about right.

"You're just lucky you made it up here when you did." The host pointed at the nearest window. "Five minutes later and you wouldn't have been able to see ten feet in front of you. There's not another house for two miles." He appraised the visitor with a slight shake of the head. "You wouldn't have made it that far in the blizzard. Not dressed the way you are."

"I drove up from the coast," Andy said, with a shiver. His face was burning and there were livid red patches on his hands which he hoped were not frostbite. He glanced past the doorway, he had the impression of faces turning in his direction, but did not focus on them closely. "Didn't think it through. I was trying to make Withrow by late afternoon, but I ended up taking the scenic route."

“The weather is unpredictable up here this time of year.” The man held out his hand. Andy shook it gingerly: his own hands were bunched up into claws with the cold. “My name is Donald Everson and those are my friends. This is supposed to be a Christmas party, but we got off to an early start.”

His smile was open and warm, lighting up every feature. He pointed toward the crowded living room, where the murmur of conversation had resumed. “Please make yourself comfortable. There’s plenty of food and drink and I’ll see about getting you some dry clothes.”

Andy struggled out of his sodden jacket and shoes, aware that time was passing. Every minute he spent here reduced his chances of seeing Maddie before the day was over. The divorce had been finalized eighteen months ago and Kayla had gotten full custody. As much as Andy hated the prospect of moving across the country from his daughter, the job in North Carolina looked promising, something he could build a life around. Once he got on his feet, he kept telling himself, he would see Maddie more often than two weekends a month.

When he stepped through the doorway, the man was holding his hands up, as if to appease his listeners. “Everything will proceed as planned,” Andy heard him say. “Please continue to enjoy the party.”

He placed a hand on Andy’s shoulder and steered him to a wingback chair close to the crackling fireplace. A few of the guests glanced over with faint curiosity, but quickly lost interest. “I won’t be a minute,” Everson said, slipping past a man loaded with two silver trays of canapes.

Andy leaned back in the chair, feeling the warmth seep into his frozen bones. Tiredness swept through him in waves. It was tempting to close his eyes, allow himself to drift into a doze. He straightened up with an effort and looked around.

Everson’s friends were a mixed lot, sharp-dressed business types mingling with scruffy youths in jeans, cocktail dresses and stiletto heels next to baggy gray sweatpants. They sat around the brightly lit room in clusters, absorbed in conversation. A dance party, or some sort of social game, had been in progress earlier: the carpets were rolled back, revealing polished oak floorboards. Diagrams and shapes drawn in chalk covered the center of the floor, forming confounding patterns.

Andy frowned, focusing his eyes through the haze of exhaustion. On second glance, the glamorous living room was not all that glamorous. Muddy footprints and melting slush marred the exposed floor. Dirty glasses and plates of half-eaten food littered the tables. Overturned wine bottles dripped dark stains onto the rolled-up carpets. Andy surveyed the messy scene with an inward wince. For all his affected refinement, Everson seemed to have more money than sense, or breeding.

Trying to stay awake, he got up and walked over to the bookshelves against the long wall. The line of heavy volumes on the top shelf caught his eye: leatherbound and layered with dust, the titles on the spines eroded to illegibility. They looked old, something a collector would pay a lot of money for. Maybe he’d been wrong about his host’s tastes. Maybe Everson was more of a sophisticate than he let on, a wealthy eccentric.

Before he knew what he was doing, he reached up and pulled down one of the volumes. Almost instantly he regretted it. The leather felt slimy and cold to the touch, like the skin of some reptilian thing, flaking in his hands. A faintly rotten smell rose from the ancient paper. Incomprehensible designs and symbols covered the yellowed pages. Andy didn’t know much about foreign languages, but he was sure he hadn’t seen this one before.

He blinked. The room moved around him, as if the floor and the ceiling had switched places: the letters seemed to float off the rotten paper and burn themselves inside his mind, a rush of fragmented images. He was dizzy so he clapped the book shut and shoved it into an empty slot on the shelf, then put a hand on the wall to steady himself.

“Worth a lot of money,” someone said at his elbow. Andy turned, startled, and for a delirious moment the room seemed to turn with him, the drawings on the floor the only fixed points, flaring with light. The speaker was a tall, well-dressed man, handsome in a bland, clean-cut sort of way. A TV anchor, or a former star athlete who still kept fit. He nodded his carefully tousled blond head at the bookshelves. “Our host has a nose for investment. Always makes the right moves.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Andy said, taking a reflexive step back. The man was drunk: his eyes were glassy, his smile wet and off-center. There was something else under the forced joviality, something that Andy couldn’t put his finger on. “I’m only here-”

“Because you got stuck in the snow.” The man stifled a belch and pointed his martini glass at the entryway. Drink sloshed over the rim of the glass, wetting his sleeve. He didn’t seem to notice. “I overheard you talking to Everson. Don’t feel like you’re intruding, or anything. No point in that. We’re all strangers here.”

What the hell did that mean?

“No worries,” Andy said and tried to smile back. The chatter in the living room was as lively as before, but now it sounded strained to him as if the revelers were pretending not to listen in on the conversation. “I won’t be staying long. Time for me to get back on the road.”

Sweat gathered under his arms, in the small of his back. His new companion was standing close, too close. Close enough for Andy to notice details he’d missed at first glance: the bags under the man’s eyes, the stains on his expensive suit, the smell of stale sweat and cologne and liquor fumes clinging to him like a cloud. All at once Andy knew what he’d seen lurking beneath the man’s drunkenness and the hairs on the back of his neck rose. He felt a desperate need to say something, anything.

“Easy to get lost out there,” the man said, as if Andy hadn’t spoken. He drained his glass in a gulp, blew out a thick, gin-soaked breath. “Easy to get lost in here too.”

Suddenly he was leaning in, the fingers of his free hand digging into Andy’s forearm with manic strength. His eyes were bright, pooling with uncomprehending fear. “Forget what I said,” he said, his voice low. “You have to leave. Right now. Don’t wait for him to come back. Just go, while you still have a chance.”

Andy tried to take a step backward, make sense of this, but he was up against the wall and the grip held him fast. “It can’t follow you outside,” the drunk said dreamily. “Without the symbols, it’s hard for it to find you. Get away from here and don’t come back.”

Before Andy could respond, a slim, muscular man approached them and laid a hand on the drunk’s shoulder, gently but firmly. Andy’s companion chuckled and grinned a big drunk grin, allowed himself to be led to the other side of the room. The two men had a conversation there: Andy could not make out what was being said, but there was no rancor or anger to it. Surely the buzz of voices in the room had not risen at just the right instant to drown out the words?

He looked down at his hand and realized he was holding the empty martini glass. The drunk must have pressed it into his hand before leaving. Faces were turned away from him, but now their indifference felt feigned, like they were waiting to see what he would do.

Not knowing why, Andy raised the glass and twirled it before his eyes. The blur in the center of it had to be a flaw in the crystal, or a smear from a greasy thumb. Beads of sweat gathered on his forehead, trickled down the back of his neck.

The glass turned a fraction to the left, catching and refracting the light.

Andy saw a vague shape squatting in circle drawn on the floor: a disturbance in the air as if from something huge and transparent, its aspect at once human and bestial and indescribable. Long appendages coiled around a humped central mass, trembling across the floorboards, probing the edges of the chalk lines. Black eyes, hundreds of them, glistening from within its rugose head, full of hunger. It was reaching for him, unfolding slowly, gaining solidity with every blink.

Somewhere far away, he was aware of the glass falling from his numb hand, shattering on the floor. There was nothing in the center of the symbols. Nothing. He rubbed his eyes, but the movement only seemed to blur his view further.

The chatter built up to a featureless noise in his ears. He couldn’t have seen what he thought he’d just seen: his eyes were playing tricks on him, stinging from lack of sleep, from the whiteness outside.

Either that, or he was going crazy.

He staggered out of the crowded living room and into the kitchen. Coffee. He could smell it bubbling, hot and dark and bitter. Coffee, and maybe something to eat: he still wasn’t hungry, but his stomach felt hollow and queasy, the kind of queasy you felt hurtling down a rollercoaster. Or freefalling from a great height, anticipating the lethal impact at the end.

The kitchen was a study in silver and chrome and thick slab marble, a gas range the size of a small car set against the far wall. Huge trays of cakes and sandwiches covered the island in the center. Puttering between the pile of food and a gleaming refrigerator was a tiny old woman with a cloud of white hair, a

plate of cheese and crackers balanced in one hand. She blinked up at Andy through a pair of thick glasses and smiled, revealing two shiny rows of even, false teeth.

"Can I get you anything, dear?"

Confused, he heard himself mutter something about coffee. The broad, high-ceilinged room seemed full somehow, as if an invisible and stifling presence had followed him in, a ripple of movement in the copper bottoms of pots and pans hanging overhead.

The old woman chuckled and patted his arm.

"Won't be long now," she said, turning away to tend to the coffee-maker. Andy did not know whether she meant the coffee or something else. "I can tell this isn't easy for you. Believe me, I felt the same way. I had my reservations."

The back of her birdlike skull, thin and brittle as an eggshell, went up and down in a nod. "Christmases are the hardest, you know," she continued. "Harder than any other holiday. I thought I'd get used to not having him around, but it only gets worse." Cataract-filmed blue eyes looked through him. "But Mr. Everson showed me we don't have to wait. We don't have to suffer. There's no nobility in suffering, contrary to whatever you may have been told."

"I'm sorry," Andy said. The old woman was muddled: she had mistaken him for someone else. But he didn't mind so much, enjoying the sudden, unexpected kindness. He smiled at her and she took his hand in both hers, the bones like twigs in parchment skin.

"Before I learned the truth, I was in a dark place." There were tears in her voice now. "I was thinking about putting an end to it myself. Anything to be with my Charles again. But now I'm glad I waited. There's a sense of purpose in doing it this way."

"No reason to be sad. Not on a day like this." Everson was standing in the doorway, an apologetic expression on his face. He held out a cordless phone toward Andy. "I'm afraid the lines are down for the moment. It happens sometimes in the winter, or if there's a bad storm."

Andy held the phone to his ear, as if the dead silence in the receiver would reveal something. "How long until they come back up?"

"No way to tell. Sometimes they send a repairman in a few hours, but I can't imagine that will happen today. Not with all the snow. For the time being, you'll have to make do with the company available. It's not as dire as it may seem." Everson laughed, seeing Andy's stricken expression. "We won't die of thirst, or start eating each other, anytime soon. But I suppose that's not what's got you looking so worried."

"No." Andy squeezed his fists until he felt his nails dig into his palms. He was being rude. Everson had let a complete stranger into his home and was doing his best to help. "I'm on my way to pick up my daughter. Drive her back to California to spend Christmas with my parents."

When Everson said nothing, he continued, aware that he was saying too much but unable to stop himself. "It'll be our last Christmas together for some time. I'm moving out east. Got a job offer there and I won't be able to visit for a while. My – her mother won't let me take her across the country."

Everson nodded with sympathy and held out a steaming cup. Andy accepted it, inhaling the scent gratefully. "I take it there is a custody dispute," he said.

"I tried to fight it," Andy said, sipping the coffee, feeling warmth spread through the middle of him. Expensive stuff by the smell and taste of it: Everson didn't seem like a Maxwell House kind of guy. "My lawyer told me not to bother. She can bring up stuff to bury us, he said. Take away my custody for good. I did – I made some bad decisions in the past."

"We all have," Everson said, looking away. In an instant, his entire persona had undergone a change. His shoulders slumped, his long, intelligent face sagging as if under a tremendous weight, lines deepening. He watched the old woman, who had set down her plate and was shuffling out of the kitchen with tiny, China-doll steps.

"Loss and despair make us think terrible things," Everson said. "When bad things happen, we're told to get over it. To pick ourselves up. But the pain of real loss changes that. Sometimes there's just no getting out from under that black cloud."

His voice was low, almost hypnotic. "No coming back from whatever dark place your mind has taken you, no matter how hard you try."

Andy's head felt fuzzy and thick. The space around him seemed to spin on some unseen axis without moving an inch. He took another swallow of coffee and nodded after the retreating figure. "Is that what happened to her? Why she's confused?"

There was a pause before Everson spoke again. "Her husband," he said with a grimace, as if bringing up the memory caused him physical pain. "This is her third Christmas without him, and she's had enough of being alone. But I wouldn't say she's confused. I believe she's seeing clearly for the first time."

"Must be hard, at her age."

"It's hard at any age." Without prompting, Everson refilled Andy's cup. "All of us here have lost something, or someone. Some of us have lost ourselves. But there is a way out, into the light of truth. Into something greater than us."

In Andy's mind, the moment froze, stretched out interminably. The coffee in the cup caught hold of his gaze, drew it downward in a vanishing spiral. Iridescent swirls sparkled on its surface, galaxies rolling across the nameless dark, colliding in explosions of cosmic dust. When he looked up, Everson was gone.

Andy found that he didn't mind being left alone. It alleviated the vague discomfort he felt amid all those buzzing voices. He gulped coffee and stared out of the kitchen window, into the dead heart of winter. There were cars parked in the back yard, buried up to the windows in snow. He could hear the wind whistling across the desolation, the glass rattling softly in its frame.

The whiteness beckoned to him: pristine and unsullied, a blank page upon which a life could be written, all mistakes erased, all false starts and crossed-out words replaced with the right ones. It would be comforting to go outside, he knew, lie down under its blanketing presence. The cold would last but a moment. There would be dreams in the embrace of winter, dreams that blotted out the ugliness of the world, the frustration and disappointment. Snow would cover it all.

By the time he walked into the living room, Everson had just finished addressing the party in the living room. Andy almost caught a shred of conversation, but it eluded him, its meaning hovering just out of reach.

Was it his imagination, or had the crowd thinned out a little? He strained his eyes to see the drunken man in the expensive suit, the old woman from the kitchen, but the faces and bodies blended together, interchangeable. His thoughts failed to coalesce into a coherent whole.

"Are you lost?"

He turned, the room moving slightly with him. A young girl was looking up at him from a nearby sofa. She patted the set next to her and Andy slumped in the softness. A dull pounding had settled behind his eyes.

"It's almost begun," the girl said, glancing around the room, her voice breathy with excitement. She was pretty in a thin, delicate way: a colorful scarf wound around her head like a turban. Her smile brought out her pallor, the sharp, prominent bones of her face.

Andy's brain sloshed inside his skull, unmoored. It was difficult for him to form words, no matter how desperately he wanted to speak. The remaining guests had joined hands inside the circle on the floor, chanting something low and rhythmic.

"Finally we can move on," the girl said, or Andy thought she said. She closed her eyes, her face poised between reverence and terror. "We were waiting for another to complete the cycle. We didn't know it would be you. But we shouldn't have worried."

Whispers swirled inside Andy's head, a wave that threatened to wash him away. Yet the girl's voice came through clear and sweet, every word etching itself on his mind. She leaned closer to him and the smell of her was bittersweet, like crushed flowers. A bone-deep cold emanated from her frail body.

"It got too much for me to bear," she said, her luminous eyes brimming with tears. "Dying for weeks, for months. Aware and awake every awful moment, writhing with the worst pain imaginable. I couldn't face telling my family. The hurt my death would cause them. But we're all in the same boat here. We can find strength in each other, comfort in our choice."

"Choice?" The sound of his own voice, a drawn-out, inhuman croak, frightened Andy. It was wrong, it was all wrong. The coffee. Everson had drugged him, slipped something in when he wasn't looking. This was a hallucination, it had to be. "I don't understand."

The symbols on the floor flared like lightning, bathed his surroundings in a leprous radiance inside which something vast was rising, blotting out the angles of the room.

The chanting reached a climax. Screams cut through, melded into a single shriek of agony, or ecstasy. Andy had a sudden impression of a boundless windswept plain, piles of bones and shredded, bloody clothes scattered far and wide, the aftermath of a gluttonous frenzy.

"Of course you understand," Everson spoke next to him. The girl was gone, swallowed by the terrible light. "Throughout history, there were always a chosen few who dared test the boundaries. Let the truth light burn away the lies, the illusions that blind our mortal shell. Enlightenment through pain and anguish."

He tilted his head and smiled indulgently. His face hung like an ill-fitting mask, the muscles slightly askew. Blood leaked from the edges of his eyes and mouth, covered his clothes, dripped from his shirt sleeves. "There are forces in the universe," he said, "listening to our prayers. Willing to answer our pleas. With the right prayer, they can be awakened. But theirs has been a long sleep, and they're hungry. Like every deity, they demand to be fed."

Andy tried to close his eyes, shut out what was before him, but the images continued to play on, prying into the meat of his brain. Cruel fingers pried his eyelids open, held him down fast. "Your coming here was no accident," Everson's voice said, echoing across a great distance. "The gods brought you here to complete the cycle. Someone must be left behind. A witness to the horrors, a token explanation for the inexplicable. You will be shown wondrous things. New horizons will open to you, new revelations."

Red flooded Andy's vision, flooded the earth, a crimson tide without end, obliterating all consciousness, all reason.

But still he watched, unable to look away.

When he came to, hot sun was burning through tall, dusty windows. Country music wheedled from an ancient jukebox. His mouth was dry, his hair matted and his clothes stuck to him greasily. Black gunk under his broken nails. His lap crusted with vomit and worse.

The bar was dark and all but empty and smelled of stale beer. In a corner booth, a middle-aged man in a rumpled suit slumped over an empty bottle of liquor. At the counter, a group of sun-leathered retirees nursed tall drinks with umbrellas. Television screens blared on mute over rows of dusty glasses.

If he tried hard, he could remember walking out into the light, pushing through the snow, trailing red like ribbons. Finding a key in an ignition, the headlong flight south, into the desert, away from the dead silence, from eyes that followed him in the whiteness, shone like moons in the frozen sky. But remembering so would awaken other memories, images he didn't want to face. He let his mind go blank, dragged himself to his feet and staggered to the bar.

A matronly woman of indeterminate old age, rouged and powdered and wrapped in a gaudy flower-print dress, eyed him disgustedly and moved away. The surly, tattooed bartender placed a beer in front of him without a word. In the bartender's dark glasses, he looked worse than ever, his face haggard, the flesh around his eyes puffy and bruised.

Up above, the screens flashed on images of death and mutilation, the lips of a grave-looking anchor moving without making a sound. The tickertape spoke of a grisly crime scene in the Rockies, ritual killings, or a mass suicide pact. Of law enforcement agencies launching a nationwide manhunt for the suspected killer. Music howled and clashed. The picture flickered, the colors started to run: he averted his eyes, counted the rings on the dark wood of the bar and swigged beer.

Andy turned on the stool and watched the rumple-suited drunk in the booth. The man lay facedown on the table and didn't stir. A fly buzzed past the dirty table, alighted on the back of the man's neck. Another one crawled out of the thinning thicket of hair. Still the man didn't stir. The buzzing intensified, rattling the bottle against Andy's teeth, the flyblown bar windows in their frames.

Andy prayed that the man would get up, move in his sleep, make a sound. Anything. He rubbed his hand over his eyes and it came away wet.

The woman next to him leaned over and smiled. The smile did not quite fit the contours of her face, and her eyes were solid black, like an oil slick. Andy saw his reflection multiplied in them, his mouth contorted in a voiceless scream. "There, there," the woman said in a maternal voice, patting him on the shoulder. Reaching across, she took the beer bottle from his numb hands, moments before it would have tumbled to the floor. "No need for that. No need for that at all."

The Home of Guiding Hands (James Musgrave)

Felicia Summers has a stroke at fifty-four. She is putting the final touches on a birthday cake, a pink stroke of vanilla cream icing on the letter "e" that spells "love." She falls to the floor, never to speak another word, or to walk another step. But her brain continues to process, even though she has gaps in her memory, the way a streaming video can stutter and stop before running the action again later in full color and vibrant details.

Tom, her younger brother, finds her, calls the ambulance, and discovers the Home of Guiding Hands. He, along with Medicare, are paying her rent, and since their parents are dead, Tom becomes her guardian, and he fills out the Advance Directive. Since he works as a long-distance trucker, she sees him once per month.

Felicia still remembers the speech of Mrs. Andrews, the administrator at the Home of Guiding Hands. The words became a mantra inside Felicia's mind, to be repeated during the moments of her deepest fears. "We at the Home of Guiding Hands protect you, we keep you safe, and we make your daily life the best it can be. Our hands channel the love we feel inside, and we guarantee that our hands will be there whenever you need us."

But tonight, six months later, Felicia Summers waits, petrified, staring up at the clock on the wall with the big hands. Its fingers move slowly, and the sequence of clicks the timepiece makes follows the steps coming down the hall. He is alone with them, with her, with the night, and with their imaginations.

Larry Kpingbah, Certified Nursing Assistant, has been molesting and raping patients under his care for four years. Each time one complains to nurses that he is doing this, it is the patient who is blamed for having confusion from Alzheimer's, or for misunderstanding the intimate activities required of a CNA during his routine of changing diapers, washing the body, and delivering the patient to the bathroom.

Besides, if the administrators believe these women, there will soon be an investigation, and they all knew that could mean the loss of funds from government agencies and, ultimately, the loss of patients.

Because he chooses the right victims, Larry is able to develop a pattern of success that he believes is unstoppable. When he first sees Felicia, he knows she will be the best lover of all. Felicia can't speak, she's relatively young (his oldest was 100), and she fights him. Larry loves to overpower these women, as it adds an extra thrill of conquest. He now has a special ritual with Felicia that he records on his micro camera.

Steps, the steps, the 39 Steps. She is Pamela. He is Richard Hannay. They play this game each night. She hears the water running. Richard, who is on the run, is washing his hands before he enters the room. The squeal of the old plumbing as the water gushes. The snores of Mrs. Plumly, her eighty-nine-year-old roommate. Felicia can feel the clacking of the train on the tracks as it vibrates her bed. She hears the whistle, and she takes a deep breath. The door to the bathroom opens, and Richard enters her compartment.

"Pamela! Darling! It's so good to see you again. I've just come from the dining car. They wouldn't serve me. Told me it's too late. I'm so happy, Pam, to have you here. You always keep me supplied with spirts. Espiritus, the elixir of life! They're still after me, you know. They think I murdered Anabella, but we know differently, don't we, dearest Pamela?"

His voice is a harsh whisper, and it sends a penetrating dagger into her heart. He is well over six feet tall, and his dark face, even though smiling, casts a gloom over her that she finds difficult to suppress. He reminds her of those old *Twilight Zone* shows when handsome doctors turned into aliens or monsters from beyond the grave.

Felicia nods vigorously. Her pale blue eyes radiate the confidence she hopes he will enjoy. But she knows his hands are coming, and she bites down on her lower lip, her front teeth digging into it like she used to do playing baseball with her two brothers. The ball came at her from Will's hand, and she bit down before she swung the bat.

Richard pulls the pint bottle from under her mattress. He slowly unscrews the top, smiling at her. "Want a snort, Pam? C'mon, gal! It'll put hair on your chest!"

She frowns and shakes her head. Will, her older brother, became an alcoholic, lost his family, and she often saw him before she had her stroke. He would dig in the dumpster outside, behind her store.

Will's eyes had the same petulant sorrow that Richard's have. But Richard's hands are not the strong hands of a pitcher; they're like snakes. These hands are going to strike at any moment. She holds her breath, clenches her own hands into fist balls, at her sides under the covers, and tries to think about how she can resist him this time.

"Let's try something different tonight, shall we, Pamela?" Richard pulls down her covers, exposing her body to the chill in the room. "Goosey, goosey gander. Your flesh is getting rounder." She can move her arms, but her legs are in perpetual slumber. This time, when he caresses her stomach under her granny gown, she lets him.

On the other nights, her resistance came in various forms. When she gouged his neck with her nails, he cut them down to the quick. When she bit him, he brought a plastic mouth guard. And when she slapped him, he laughed. What will happen tonight?

Those hands. He slips them under her, lifting her up. She falls against his chest and reflexively grabs around his neck. She can feel his breathing against her chest. Can she gouge out his eyes? Will he screw her again in the bathroom? He sets her up on his lap, while he sits on the toilet, and his liquored breath pants into her ear like a wild steam engine.

"It's Labor Day! Nobody's here but me. I'm the skeleton crew, so why don't we have a communist party in honor of us, the workers of the world? Why should I be so selfish, Pamela? They've all come to enjoy you. They're the spies who've come in from the cold, my darling. We've finally reached an understanding, don't you see? They'll no longer try to hunt me down if you show them some of your special kindness. You'll do that for me, won't you, sweetheart?"

Others? She becomes stiff in his arms, and her arms tighten their grip around his neck until he grunts. "Shit! Stop that." The room, with its flowered walls and sparse, practical furniture, becomes a foyer to an outer Hell.

She listens intently, as he carries her through the door he kicks open. She can make no sounds, but her hearing is like a bat's, and she hopes to receive the sound of a car or an ambulance outside. Sometimes, the hospital will send over a new patient to be admitted, even on holidays. If it happens now, she vows to bite into his neck with all her might.

Inside the physical therapy room, there are three men waiting. They stand in a semi-circle, their backs to her as she is carried across the threshold. She smells the odor of marijuana, the same deep-sweet smell she could often smell coming from Will's bedroom at home. When their parents died in an automobile crash, his smoking became more frequent. Felicia believes this led to Will's later alcoholism, but these men were different.

The first man turns around and sneers, his black brows raised in greeting, his head bald and shiny under the neon's glow. His grimy tee shirt reads, "Born to Raise Hell." And there's a faded, vicious devil beneath the words, and it is also smoking a joint.

"Don't worry. This is the therapy room, ain't it? We's jes' smokin' ourselves some medical marijuana. Right, dudes?"

The other two men join in his laughter. They are identical twin brothers. Whereas the bald man is older, these two are in their teens, with long, greasy brown hair and with quick, rat-like movements of their skinny arms and legs. They both move up to her as Larry lays her down on the massage table and raises her yellow nightgown to reveal her still-shapely legs.

"Whooeee! Nice ear warmers. So, Larry, she can't talk? And she can't walk? That's my idea of a perfect bitch! Jes' lay there and take it all in, right?" The bald man grabs his crotch, and the laughter erupts again.

"Let's get her stoned before we do it," says one of the twins. The first twin inhales a long toke on the joint and moves over to the head of the table. "Danny, you hold her mouth open," he tells his brother.

The other twin places his grease-stained fingers inside Felicia's mouth and pulls her lips apart. His brother bends over, covering her mouth with his. When he exhales into her mouth, she coughs, spasmodically, but the smoke gets into her lungs.

They take turns doing these shotgun kisses until she begins to feel light-headed, and the THC is taking her on its imaginary ride. These men begin to look like deformed phantoms from beneath the earth, some kind of posse that is sent to torture women during their last moments.

"Get going. Somebody might come," says Larry, and his eyes dart around the room, and he steps out into the hall. "Nothing. It's all quiet on the Western Front. You guys owe me big time. I'll take some videos now." The micro camera is attached to the front of his scrubs, and he pushes the record button.

The three men drop their pants and underwear, step out of them, and line up at the massage table. The bald man is first followed by the twins. They are all leering and sucking in the last of the joints with skull and crossbones roach clips.

Bam, bam, bam! The four men turn in unison to stare at the door of the physical therapy closet. Something, or someone, is pounding on the surface of the door from within.

"What the fuck?" Larry says. "Could one of the patients be in there?" He walks slowly over to the door, licking his lips, and his hand trembles, as he reaches out to turn the doorknob.

Felicia's mind is repeating her mantra, repeatedly. *We at the Home of Guiding Hands protect you, we keep you safe, and we make your daily life the best it can be. Our hands channel the love we feel inside, and we guarantee that our hands will be there whenever you need us.* She turns her head to watch the door as it opens slowly. She can feel a silent power enter her body. It's a power that has never been used, but she believes it comes from the thousands of kind, loving people who have taken care of her over the months of her confinement and treatment. So many people who have loved ones, and who want the best treatment for her. Felicia can feel this control pulling at something inside that closet. The force inside the closet at first resists her, as if it were restrained by other forces outside her mind.

The four men stare as the door swings open, but when it is finally wide open, there is nothing inside but stacked barbells, weights, walkers, and other therapeutic equipment.

"It's empty. Let's fuck this bitch and get out of here. It's too weird," says the bald one, moving to get up on the table with Felicia.

"No! Look!" Larry Kpingbah yells, and he points at dozens of hands that are crawling out of the closet, and they undulate over the carpeted floor like inchworms. The hands are cut-off at the wrists, and their fingers dig into the carpet, dragging the palms behind the digits like the pink bodies of spiders.

We keep you safe. As baldy pulls himself up on the massage table, Felicia lashes out, punching him in the groin, and he falls back over onto the carpeted floor, clutching his balls and groaning. *Electro-therapy!* Felicia's mind sends the order out to the crawling hands.

Two of the hands crawl toward the standing generator equipment used to shock damaged nerves into life again. As these two hands climb up the electronic equipment to man the controls, two other hands undulate over to the two conductor pads that are wired into the generator. As they pull the cords toward the bald man, who is still writhing in pain on the carpet, six other hands—two at his throat, two at his wrists and two on his ankles, hold him down. He tries to get up, but he remains in their vice-like grip, squirming and lashing his bald head from side-to-side, screaming, "Get these fuckers off me! Larry! Twins!"

As Larry and the twins try to run over to help the bald man, six more hands grab barbells out of the closet. *We guarantee that our hands will be there whenever you need us.* The hands push the barbells with great force, and they roll the sixty pounds of steel across the carpet, where they collide with the legs of the three men, sending them sprawling helplessly down on the floor.

Felicia begins to smile from her perch on the table, as she watches the sport she's created down below. *Our hands channel the love we feel inside,* her mind chants, and eighteen more hands crawl out to grab hold of the throats, wrists, and ankles of the last three men.

When the two hands fasten the electric pads to the bald man's scrotum, and the other two hands turn up the charge to maximum, the current spikes, and his body begins to jolt and undulate like one of the nursing home's epileptics in the midst of a grand mal seizure. He loses control of his bladder, and he shits. When he comes to, he lets out the scream of a tortured demon. "Christ! Let me go! I'm gonna die!"

All of this noise has roused the patients in the Home of Guiding Hands. As they gradually filter into the Physical Therapy Room, they look over this macabre scene of four men writhing on the floor, three without pants, all of them being held down by something invisible and quite powerful.

From high above, seated on her table of conquest, Felicia Summers is waving her hands. She looks like some horizontally prone conductor of a phantom orchestra, leading her musicians of glory in their triumphal finale.

When the police arrive, the opera music is playing over the television in the Physical Therapy Room. Two policemen stand with Larry Kpingbah and his accomplice, the bald man. The officer in charge, Sergeant Radley, is speaking to the administrator, Mrs. Andrews.

"We've been trying to find this guy for ten years. Families have complained to us, but you never allow cameras to catch these creeps in action. Without evidence, we can't convict. Finally, we can put some of them away. The idiot filmed the entire thing on his digital camera."

Mrs. Andrews coughs into her hand. "Is there any way you can keep the name of our home out of the papers, Sergeant?"

"I don't know. What do you think, Mr. Summers?" The sergeant turns to face Tom who is standing beside his brother, Will. They are both beside their sister, Felicia, who is still lying on the table.

"You're in charge, Sergeant," Tom says.

As the two other officers separate the identical twins, who are locked together in a traumatic embrace, they look up at the TV. On it, Dr. Ben Carson, the surgeon, is separating two conjoined babies with his blade. The babies are joined at their foreheads. One officer is trying pull the twin brothers apart. Like the babies on the screen, they, too, are joined together, their arms entwined in a traumatized embrace, their heads pushed together by some unseen force. "Hell, Bill, I can't get these two apart. They're stuck like glue."

His partner points up at the screen. "Yeah, maybe you need a blade like Dr. Carson has. Say, ain't he the one who just got appointed to President Trump's team? Surgeon General or something?"

Sergeant Radley interrupts them. "No. He's the head of Housing and Urban Development."

Tom smiles. "It figures. You guys expect Trump to appoint a real doctor as Surgeon General? He'll probably pick Dr. Oz."

The officers laugh but not Mrs. Andrews.

Tom and Will are there, and Felicia smiles up at them. Will, who has been off the booze for three weeks now, is crying. He's very emotional from early sobriety, so she takes his hand. Like the hands she controlled, his hand is strong and firm, but it is shaking from his tears. She wants to tell him she loves him, but she can't. Instead, she squeezes his pitcher's hand, envisions in her mind holding the bat, swinging it, and connecting with the ball. The ball soars, out over the outstretched fielders' hands, and into the crowd of screaming fans, who capture her new power into their hearts with joy.

The Final Float (Kevin Novalina)

"That it?" Kyson said.

He pointed at a wall of thickets and timbered old-growth dense as the rest of the woods surrounding them. An overgrown road disappeared inside.

"Is what it?" Brodie said, raising his Oakley's and squinting through the back glass.

Kyson held the napkin up, slid his eyes from the scratched directions to the road and back. He angled it right, spun it left, then balled it up and dropped it in the floorboard.

Brodie shrugged and slipped his shades back down. Threw the pick-up in reverse, pulled onto the road, and started in.

The pitch was sharp, the truck bouncing over oak roots knotted in the road. Branches scraped the sides of the vehicle, the windows, the cab.

Slivers of sun-silvered river flared through holes in the canopied bush. Pieces of a building appeared and disappeared.

"Money," Brodie said.

"Ever any doubt?" Kyson said, gripping the "oh shit" handle. But he'd started to doubt. Began to think the place didn't exist. It wasn't on a map, not even close to another *road* on the map. And though he and Brodie had floated different rivers the last couple years, they'd never heard of this one. It was the weird old guy at Mason's Pub who told them about the place. The Rotten Oar. Overheard Kyson and Brodie talking about a two-day float and slid down to the stool next to them.

"You never had a float like it," he said, a wiry beard veined by a braid of scar along his jaw line. "Life changing."

He scrawled drunken directions on a beer damp napkin and three days later they had arrived.

At the bottom of the road it smoothed and opened to an old house and a large, weather-flaked barn. Behind the barn, a cluster of decrepit sheds.

"Rotten Oar Floats" was painted in red childlike letters above the open barn door. They pulled in, got out and looked around.

The house was bowed in the middle. A dead maple had grown through the front porch, the top lying over the rusted tin roof. The breeze waved a shutter back and forth like a sleepy blinking eye.

"Don't look like much to me," Kyson said. He adjusted his Tilly Hat and said, "Anybody even here?"

Brodie looked around, spat, leaned in the truck and laid on the horn.

A soft echo.

He hit it again.

Cicadas screamed. There was a junkyard behind the sheds. Hollowed out vehicles, rusted through and gutted with weeds.

"Help you?" a scratchy voice said from the dark of the barn. A large man appeared, staring as if he'd never seen customers before. He was bald apart from a tuft of white hair above one ear. He wore an unbuttoned shirt and a purple, rope thick scar ran from his naval over his breastbone. It went up his throat and chin, splitting his bottom lip in a meaty wet V.

Kyson looked away. Said: "You rent canoes?" The man looked over his shoulder at the sign, then back at Kyson without speaking.

"We're gonna need one," Brodie said, slow. "And a shuttle upriver. 'Bout two days worth."

The man ran his eyes over them and looked out at the river. "Why don't you boys go somewheres else to do your floating?"

"Good sales pitch," Kyson said, to himself.

Brodie's jaw tightened. "We were told this is the float to take," he said. "Took us three days to find it, so..."

The man breathed heavy, spittle whistling from his lip, and he scratched at the scar. Shook his head and disappeared inside the barn. There was a loud thump, two slaps of wood-on-wood and he reappeared,

dragging a long oak canoe. It was warped and sun bleached, dark stains pock-marking the wood. One gunwhale was busted and the hull was splintered and riddled with holes patched with sap. Inside were two bowed oars.

"Lives up to its name," Kyson said. "This thing even float?"

"It's a boat, ain't it?" the man said.

"Not really."

"It'll work," Brodie said. "What do we owe you?"

"Hundred a head," the man said.

"A *hundred*?" Kyson said.

Brodie held his hand up.

Kyson walked over and looked out at the river. The sun threw a million diamonds on the surface and thirty yards up it ribboned off and out of sight, its skin wrinkled in the breeze.

Brodie paid and the man disappeared inside the barn.

"Two hundred bucks?" Kyson said.

"We're here," Brodie said, unloading the cooler. "Let's just *be* here."

Kyson grabbed the fishing rods. "Better be a hell of a float."

Brodie winked. "Always is."

The man pulled out in a truck with tattered screens bellied out for windows. He squeaked to a stop and stared ahead. Motor idling, brown exhaust streaming from the tailpipe.

"Hundred each," Kyson said, "and we load the damn canoe."

"I'm just ready to be on the water."

They loaded.

The cab floor was rusted out, the seat cushion-less, its springs shot.

"Guess we're in back," Kyson said.

They hopped in. The gears ground and they jerked toward the road they'd come down on, nosed up and disappeared into the landscape.

The truck rocked to a halt.

They dusted leaves from their laps. Exposed skin was red-welted from two hours of biting twigs, clawing briers.

It was five feet from the embankment to the water and Brodie jumped in, knee deep, and extended an arm.

Kyson eased the boat over the lip, grunting as the weight took hold and it dropped, smacking wings of water out the sides. He turned and the man was standing a nose apart between noses, breath whistling through the lip. "Ten miles in, you'll come to a V," he said. "You're gonna wanna keep to the right." He sucked in a string of spit and swallowed, his Adam's Apple rolling up, then down beneath the scar. "That's the float you're here for."

"You bet," Kyson said. He stepped back and climbed down into the warm water.

The man stood over him, staring down.

They grabbed a tree trunk, flung mud-slimed feet over the side and launched. It wobbled and they dipped their oars, bracing it. Eased out, absorbed by that first buoyant glide of a river's slither.

"Hear that?" the old man yelled. Kyson looked back. He stood facing the woods across the river. "Keep to the right!"

"Hell's that about?" Kyson said. As the thickets eclipsed the embankment, the man threw his head back, cupped his hands around his mouth, and screamed, "I told 'em!"

And he was gone.

The boil took them. Began to spin the stern perpendicular to the river, but Brodie dug left as Kyson pried the stern right, straightening it. A perfect cadence. The product of many miles and many currents.

The chop turned to foamy rapids that lifted the nose, then dipped it, a spray washing over them.

It rose and dipped. Smooth, rolling.

The landscape slid backwards. Opened up, then constricted.

The run pushed them around a bend and Kyson backwatered hard. Brodie threw his head back and howled.

"Hell *yeah*!" Kyson screamed, looking ahead at a grid of standing waves. The head troughed and the stern lifted, raising him off his seat, before the bow crested and sat him down. Then it calmed, the green water shoaling into an eddy.

Brodie palm-to-jaw popped his neck. "Not bad."

They coasted along, paddling in intervals. Boots submerged in a couple inches of water that had leaked through the resin. The surface went light green, then brown as the water shallowed over a riffle.

"Warm beer me," Brodie said. Kyson reached in the melted water of the cooler for a couple Blue Ribbons. He took a sip. Brodie bubbled his hard.

The water darkened again and they placed their oars across their laps. To the left, a fish rolled and disappeared. "Let's get some dinner," Brodie said and grabbed his pole. Baited the hook with a fly and cast, letting it drag.

The sun was wide and unblocked in the sky. Soft-shell turtles stuck to the banks like wet cobblestones and loggerheads sat motionless on the trunks of downed trees. A water moccasin S'd past them upriver, its head raised. The soft current split around a boulder in the center of the river like white lace and the glassy surface of the water threw everything back on itself.

`Brodie finished his beer, crushed the can and peeled his wet shirt off.

` Kyson stared at the U.S.M.C. tattoo in Old English across his back. He'd just gotten it a couple days ago and it was still puffy and red.

"You nervous?" Kyson said.

"Not looking forward to all those needles." He reeled in, cast again. "Can't wait for boot-camp, though."

Kyson knew this. Since Junior High, Brodie had been preparing for the Marine Corps. The last couple years it'd become an obsession. He read *Soldier Of Fortune*, quoted *Full Metal Jacket* and worked out constantly, dieting until he was pads-on-pads of hard muscle roped in veins. He ran five miles before sun-up every morning, rain or shine, sick or well. He'd tried to get Kyson to enlist on the Buddy System. Even had a recruiter come see him. The Corps paid for college and you'd make good money and see the world. But Kyson did the math and the good money he'd be making came out to about $350 a week. And the world he'd be seeing would be places the locals shoot at you. Plus, Kyson had been accepted at the University of Virginia and that was world enough. So he passed. And though he'd miss his best friend since before *He-man* was wimpy, he wasn't about to go die in a desert for minimum wage.

Brodie was about to take a drink when the rod bent, the line whining.

He snagged back and worked it and within a few minutes, the pale trout was beside the boat, thrashing. He palmed it, dislodged the hook and tossed it in the bottom. It flopped upright in the crude-whittled keel line and tried to swim in the sloshing water.

"We'll eat tonight," Brodie said and slipped his KA-BAR knife from its sheath. He smiled and for a second, Kyson saw him as he used to—his buddy, wide-eyed and camo-ed with dirt. Who'd always be there tomorrow with some new idea or adventure to follow. Hard to believe this might be the last trip. Say a war doesn't get him, they'd both meet new friends, move on. It all felt like the end, like their river had reached the sea.

Kyson finished his beer, rigged his pole and said, "Let me show you how a real angler does it."

They made camp on a rock bar with an oxbow lake arced behind it. It was the last flat bank before the landscape began to rise. The cliffs ahead were white, the tops limned with trees. The sun hovered just above, backlighting them.

Clouds the color of wet tissue stretched apart in the distance.

They each cleared a section of rocks for a bed and made small, makeshift lean-tos. They started a fire in a pit ringed with river stones, drank and skipped shale. The water was dark except for a froth of small whitecaps that smoothed off and eddied on.

Kyson was drunk and seeing the world twinned. He cupped a handful of water over his face, the back of his neck. He was burnt, the skin on his nose and shoulders tight and sore. "Got warm."

"Gonna get chilly," Brodie said, and pointed at the clouds.

The sun flat lined over the rim of the cliffs.

After a while, they removed the fish from the stringer (Kyson had struck out, but Brodie landed another) and ran sticks through the bellies and out the mouths. Their red and green tint glimmered over the flames. They sat on rocks, sipping hot beers and yawning.

A steady breeze kicked up, rattling the leaves. The smell of honeysuckle in its wake.

"Guess we might not get to do this again," Kyson said.

"I'll be back." Brodie took his fish from the flame, pinched a piece off. "It's only four years."

Kyson held his fish to his lips, blew and took a bite, the fluffy white meat like cotton. "Remember *G.I. Joe*?"

Brodie smiled.

"You never admitted when I killed you?"

"You never did," Brodie said. "Cobra can hit a Joe, but he can't kill him." They laughed.

After a minute, Kyson stopped. "They drop you off over there," he said, "you *can* get killed."

"I can kill back, too."

They sat, fire popping and the river sliding by, black and fluid.

"Bout the eighth week of camp, your dick'll be so hard you can't blink."

Brodie smiled, said: "I get out, I feel sorry for the first mess hall *I* chow at. She'll see what one motivated Marine and his gun can do."

"Kristi Spark?"

"*Hell* no! Titties look like two raw eggs on a door nail."

"Like putty in panty hose."

"Marbles in a condom."

They laughed and Kyson raised his can. "To counting down but not counting out," he said. "Semper fi, motherfucker!"

Brodie raised his can. "Oorah!"

Heat lightning lit up the landscape. A distant rumble of thunder. The wind picked up, making a lip of waves crumble over the beach. A few drops of rain popped surfaces.

"Roughing it tonight," Brodie said.

"Any other way?"

Another flicker and the rain looked like ghost fingers thumping the water's surface.

It began to fall hard and they huddled under their lean-tos. The fire hissed and fluttered but didn't go out. After a half-hour, the storm slackened and moved on, its only evidence, the occasional wink of light and low grind of thunder disappearing upriver. The moon slid out.

They lay soaked in the mud, Kyson staring out at the fire.

"Brodie?"

He groaned.

"Who you think that old bastard was yelling at?"

"Don't know," Brodie said, voice dragging. "Bet he don't, either."

"Weird," Kyson said.

"Fuck him. He's miles off."

"More ways than one," Kyson said and closed his eyes.

A distant scream snapped him awake.

Moonlight filtered through the twigs of the lean-to, tiger-striping his face. It took a second to realize where he was.

There was a deep moan from the other side of the river.

Kyson rolled out, his insides novacained. Clothes wet and heavy.

"Brodie?" he said, but Brodie wasn't there. The embers in the fire pit glowed and he stoked them and threw tinder on and it lit up Brodie's silhouette, shin-deep in the water near the end of the bar. Motionless, staring up at the cliffs.

"The hell is that?" Kyson said, running toward him.

Another scream broke, with a grumbled answer from the left wall, a wailed response from the right, zigzagging farther downriver.

"Animals?" Kyson said and held his breath.

"Don't think so."

They heard the screams another few minutes.

They didn't sleep the rest of the night.

Light came and the land began to form and take shape. One large Polaroid shaken until it developed. A natural chiaroscuro, mist smoked over the river. Somewhere in the distance, the sound of runoff.

After the screams stopped, they'd sat in silence. Brodie watching the cliffs. Kyson keeping the fire alive. His clothes gripped him, chilling him to the marrow and his body ached from too much beer under too much sun. He washed his face and drank from the river, shivering.

"Hell with it," he said, voice sandpapered whet-rock. "Getting a hangover beer." The first drink was hard, but he put it away and began to feel better.

Brodie tipped the canoe, drained the water and righted it. Following his lead, Kyson loaded the gear. He pissed on the coals, then swept stones over the pit with the side of his boot, and they slid the boat to the water's edge and pushed off.

The mist was a gauzy cataract around them. Brodie dug hard, cross-stroking in a scattershot rhythm and Kyson struggled to control the yaw.

"You okay?" Kyson said.

No response.

"Brodie?"

"Just want some action's all."

The cliffs rose around them like a serpent's jaws. Large headwalls that cricked Kyson's neck when he looked up too long. The facing was pocked and pitted like acne scars.

"Could've been that old bastard," Kyson said. "Fucking with us."

"Maybe," Brodie said.

They wound on, Kyson drinking more and buzzing again. The sun burned the mist away. The water was deeper and a deeper shade of green.

After an hour or so, they came upon a spine of large boulders, dark and slick, that rose and disappeared in the water like a sea dragon's body.

"What you think?" Kyson said. "I don't trust that clit-lipped fucker."

"I'm here for a good float," Brodie said, over his shoulder. Kyson watched the delta slide by as he backwatered and the left leg disappeared behind the grading landscape.

They rode the river, the dark water like gator scales in the sun. Then, the river constricted into a gorge and sped up in a loud hiss and burst. A gauntlet of boulders and banks, rushes and falls.

"Jesus," Kyson said and, not looking back, Brodie yelled, "Unfuck yourself! This is hair rafting, baby!"

They hit the chute and the G-Force slid them up the right side of the S, then glided down and rode up the other side as the bend torsioned back. They stroked through a labyrinth of bony rapids that wrenched in a fall and exploded through a curler, where the canoe boofed off the crest, spilling them. When they resurfaced, the boat was overturned and twisting in the wash, the gear and oars bobbing in the flat-water ahead.

Brodie threw his hands up and yelled, "*That's* what I'm talking about!"

"Sank in the drank," Kyson said, side-stroking toward the boat. He reached it and Brodie retrieved the gear.

They found a cavern at the foot of the cliff and swam to it. Got out and righted the boat, threw everything inside. A tongue of water curtained off the ceiling and the river seen through it looked melted in molten glass. They climbed a large plate of limestone techtonic-ed against an end of the overhang and dove and back-flipped from its pinnacle. Dubbed it "Memorial Rock" and, across its face, Brodie etched "MEMO" with the KA-BAR and they toasted it, then boarded the canoe and shoved off. Watched "MEMO" disappear behind them.

Brodie smiled at Kyson.

"What?"

His smiled widened. "Fun, wasn't it?"

"Damn straight," Kyson said.

Brodie dug them forward, back muscles rolling under the skin. The letters of his tattoo morphing: U.s.M.c.

Kyson's oar bit in harmony. They were here and they were now and Brodie was right. It was fun.

Several miles down, they skirted a vein.

"Somebody needs art lessons," Brodie said.

Covering the cliff facing, a painting of a green stick figure, hands bound above its head. Five red figures surrounding it.

"How you get up there to paint that?" Kyson said.

"With a clinched asshole."

Kyson watched it pass behind them, out of sight.

Farther down, they saw a second image—the green figure gutted, red spraying from the bowels. Roped entrails held above the red figures' heads.

"The hell?" Kyson said.

Brodie stood in the canoe and scanned above. Shielding his eyes, he looked where they'd come from. Studied where they were headed. "Keep going," he said and sat.

They rounded again and stopped at the same time. The canyon walls on both sides were blood red. Top to water, as far as they could see.

"Fuck *is* this?" Kyson said.

Brodie didn't answer. He plowed the oar in hard and Kyson followed. They fought through a network of rapids and Kyson's headache returned, his lung lining seared. His strokes began to slap off the water and he stopped. "Hold on," he said and spat.

"Don't stop," Brodie said.

"I need a minute," Kyson said, wrists draped over his knees.

Several more strokes and Brodie yanked his oar out. Glazed in sweat, he inhaled a single breath and heaved it out.

They drifted in circles but let it go.

"Hear that?"

Brodie tilted his head.

The canoe whirled and the buzzing deepened, like the audible oscillation of a power line hum.

"Yellow-jacket nest," Brodie said.

"No," Kyson said and pointed.

In the shade, lapping against the soggy bank was a dark mound in a swarming cloud.

They nosed toward it. Closer, they saw it was bloated at one end, the color of veins under pale skin. It was slick and coated with bluebottle flies.

Kyson put his face in the crook of his arm. Flies swarmed and landed on his head and ears and he swatted.

They scuttled over Brodie's face, circling off when he shook his head. He reached his oar out and pushed and there was a release of gas as it rolled and the fly cloud exploded.

Kyson leaned over and coughed.

It was half a human torso, split with precision up the sternum. The skull and a piece of the mandible attached and dangling, the soft tissue maggot-eaten away.

Brodie back-stroked, his lips tight.

Kyson tented his shirt over his nose, spun them downriver and clawed forward.

"God," Kyson said, face bloodless. "We swam in that shit, man." He put a palm over his mouth. "I *drank* out of it."

"Just bury your paddle and keep going."

They rounded the next elbow and froze. Flanked along the right cliff top not moving, were five nude figures holding what looked like handmade longbows. Their bodies the color of skinned muscle. The color of the cliffs.

"Brodie?" Kyson said.

“Don’t,” he whispered, “look.” He knifed the blade of the oar into the water, barely slicing the surface. Extracted it just as easy.

Ahead, the muffled roar of rapids.

Kyson kept his paddle submerged, propelling with J-strokes and in the mirrored ripples, he saw each figure draw its bow down in unison and a scream erupted from the cliff top, so loud the air shimmied, the sound waves warbling the surface of the water. Droning moans ricocheted from cliff-to-cliff down the river.

He was reaching to cover his ears when Brodie was knocked off his seat as if yanked by a pulley. An arrow stemmed from his right side, the fletching of red feathers fluttering. His eyes wide, mouth open.

Kyson jumped toward him but his leg tethered. He looked down and an arrow had lodged in the meat of his thigh and stuck in the hull of the canoe. He wrapped a hand around each side of his quad and threw his head back, but his yell was drowned out by another scream above.

Arrows popped the side, punctured the cooler, strings of water tailing out. More flumped the surface around them and sank, yellow and refracted, in slow motion.

“Shit!” Kyson said and felt a slap to the side of his head. He reached up, smeared two fingertips of blood from a gash.

The rapids were closer. He tugged the arrow pinning him and saw it was shafted in bone, feathered from a cardinal wing. A broad head sculpted from a shard of toothed jawbone biting into the wood. He gripped low where the head was buried and lifted in a twist, so hard a crown popped loose.

A dark wave of arrows funneled down.

Brodie gurgled. He was hit through the bicep and hand, his knee and groin.

Kyson torqued harder and the shaft squealed and snapped and he bellied over the side for cover. The boil jerked the rod and, reaching to remove it, his feet buoyed out the other side of the boat. There was a snap in his ankle and this one he felt full force. He dragged it back, saw the blood like black smoke underwater. The arrow sunk to the feathers.

They were entering the runnel and the figures lowered their bows in unison.

Brodie twitched on the canoe bottom and Kyson thought of the trout.

“Hang on!” Kyson said and the rapids took them. A submerged boulder rocked against his floating ribs, spun him in the undertow. The arrows through his limbs poled into the riverbed and vaulted him, and he almost let go.

They rode a wave and Kyson saw a hole in Brodie’s cheek with a single band of flesh stretched thin and tacked to the bottom. They troughed and Kyson lost grip and went under. Resurfaced and the flow smoothed out.

He looked above and the figures were gone. The screams had stopped.

He vomited river foam. “They’re gone,” he said, whipping his head around.

“God,” Brodie said and coughed a string of blood. “They won’t want me now.”

Kyson tightened his grip, still watching above.

“They won’t want me now.”

“Who won’t?”

Brodie’s eyes were cut toward Kyson. His jaw locked in a grimace.

“Course they’ll want you,” Kyson said and could see Brodie’s back teeth through his cheek. “They *need* people like you.”

Around the bend, the rush of another chute.

“They want survivors,” Kyson said. He looked around for a bank, an overhang. Anything. “You’re a survivor. A G.I. Joe,” he said. “And Joes don’t die.”

Inside the canoe, the leak-water had crimsoned. The thwarts were splintered. The bottom and Port Side quilled with arrows. Kyson’s Telly hat floated by and wedged in a bush, and he thought about the drunk at Mason’s, a life changer, he’d said and that old bastard yelling, “I told ‘em!” and his face cinched in a cry but he did not.

“They won’t,” Brodie said, glassy-eyed.

The rapids louder, the water faster. A fallen tree tremored as if shaken by invisible hands. They were entering the cut.

“Know what?” Kyson said. “We get out of here, I’ll join with you. Buddy System, how’s that?” He hooked, poking his elbow over the side, tried to straighten the yaw with his other hand. “Cause they can hit us, goddamn it, but they can’t kill us,” he said, voice raised. “*Semper Fi*!” he yelled, throwing his head back. “*Oorah!*”

Brodie said, “Oorah,” in a blood-drowned voice.

“Semper Fi!” Kyson yelled.

They rounded.

Brodie rolled his eyes from Kyson to the clouds above. “Oorah,” he whispered and a tear slid over his bloodied cheekbone and pearled down pink.

“*Semper Fi motherfuckers!*” Kyson said, flipping a middle finger to the world.

And above them, flanked along the left cliff top, not moving, were five nude figures. Bodies the color of skinned muscle. Longbows drawn as a scream pierced the land.

“Oorah,” Kyson said, with what little breath he could.

Meet the Authors

Carl Hughes is a writer and journalist who has worked for the national and provincial press in the UK and has had his articles published worldwide, from the UK to Australia, India to the US. His fiction has appeared in many anthologies and magazines and he has won numerous writing competitions. He specialises in writing about the offbeat and bizarre, with a special love of horror and *Twilight Zone*-type stories. He is married and lives in Norfolk with wife Linda.

Rickey Rivers Jr. was born and raised in Alabama. He is a Best of the Net nominated writer and cancer survivor. His work has appeared in the JJ Outre Review, Stellium Literary Magazine, Fabula Argentea (among other publications).

Damir Salkovic is the author of the sci-fi thriller "Kill Zone", the occult mystery "Always Beside You", and short stories featured in multiple horror and speculative fiction magazines and anthologies, including the Lovecraft eZine, Thirteen O'Clock Press, Strange Aeon, and Scare Street's "Night Terrors" series. An auditor by trade and traveler by heart, he does his best writing on cruise ships, thirty-plus thousand feet in the air, and in the terminals of far-flung airports. He lives in Virginia with his wife. When not writing fiction, he reviews horror movies, discusses books, and shares his unsolicited opinions on just about everything on his blog, Darker Realities.

David Turnbull is a member of the Clockhouse London group of genre writers. He writes mainly short fiction and has had numerous short stories published in magazines and anthologies. His stories have previously been featured at Liars League London events and read at other live events such as Solstice Shorts and Virtual Futures. He was born in Scotland, but now lives in the Catford area of London. He can be found at www.tumsh.co.uk.

Michelle Ann King is a short story writer from Essex, England. Her stories of fantasy, science fiction, crime, and horror have appeared in over a hundred different venues, including Strange Horizons, Interzone, Black Static, and Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show. Her collections are available in ebook and paperback from Amazon and other online retailers, and links to her published stories can be found at her website: www.transientcactus.co.uk

Thomas M. Malafarina (www.ThomasMMalafarina.com) has published seven horror novels, as well as seven collections of horror short stories. He has also published a book of often strange single panel cartoons called Yes I Smelled It Too, as well as a Microsoft based technical manual called Link-Tuit. He has written and published more than 200 short stories. All of his horror books have been published through Hellbender Books an imprint of Sunbury Press. (www.Sunburypress.com).

Liam A. Spinage is a former philosophy student, former archaeology educator and former police clerk who spends most of his spare time on the beach gazing up at the sky and across the sea while his imagination runs riot.

Gary Budgen is a London based writer. He has had fiction published in many magazines such as Interzone and Dark Horizons; and anthologies including BFS award short-listed Humanagerie from Eibonvale Press. His collection of short stories, Chrysalis is published by Horrified Press and his chapbook Fragments of Onyx by Salo Press. For more information visit https://garybudgen.wordpress.com/

Stephen Lang has harboured a lifetime love of all things terrifying. His short stories have appeared in the Six Six Sixth, Seventh, ATEth and Ninth Books of Horror (BHF Books), Step into the Light (Bag of Bones Press) and Sirens Call magazine. Stephen lives in Bristol with his family and an elderly black cat.

James Musgrave has been in a Bram Stoker Finalist anthology, and he's won the First Place Blue Ribbon for Best Historical Mystery, Forevermore, at the Chanticleer International Book Awards. His most recent publication, "Voices" is in Madame Gray's Poe-Pourri of Terror, third edition, Hellbound Books. "Bug Motel" is the first story in the Toilet Zone 3 Horror Anthology, Hellbound Books. "Jasmine" is in the anthology Draw Down the Moon published by Propertius Press. His adult short fiction anthology Valley of the Dogs, Dark Stories, won the Silver Medal at the 2021 Reader's Favorite international contest. Two of his historical mystery series are published through and curated by the American Library Association's Biblioboard.com. He has an MFA from San Diego State. See more at emrepublishing.com

Kevin Novalina has published two short story collections, Death Roll and Ink On Wood, and has had Fiction, Non-fiction and Poetry published in over 200 Literary Journals, Magazines and Anthologies. He won numerous writing competitions and was nominated for multiple prizes and awards, including three Pushcart Prizes.